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THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

No4

The Cornish Pixie Affair

Peter Leslie

Based on the exciting MGM-ARENA T.V. series starring Stephanie Powers and Noel Harrison

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CHAPTER ONE: MURDERER'S SHY

MIST, drifting across the sea as the sun rose, had been dispersed by a westerly breeze before the first fishing boat chugged out of the harbour. By the time the cracked bell of the town-hall clock spelled out eight o'clock, the wind had freshened and veered two points to the north, ripping the sky into ragged banners of cloud that streamed over the moorland which cradled the port and shrouded the gaunt bulk of Trewinnock Tor a mile and a half along the coast road towards The Lizard. Half an hour later, as those few shopkeepers whose shops remained open in the winter walked, rode or pedalled to work, it began to rain.

It was a thin rain, more of a drizzle really, drifting in over the cliffs, in gusts across the sea wall, pitting the surface of the swell which heaved at a line of yachts in their canvas covers and rocked dinghies at their moorings. But it was penetrating too — and soon the shallow slate roofs of the pink and white-washed cottages, themselves reflected in the shining streets, were glistening along each side of the valley leading to the cove.

Around the granite Customs House, water chortled in the old guttering and splashed down ramps slanting past lobster pots and rusty winches towards the beach. The rain blew in through windows and doors, formed puddles around the bandstand by the lifeboat station, and drenched the subtropical foliage sheltering stonework and porch. It cascaded down the steep hill winding back to the main road. It dripped from eaves and buttresses and balconies, and swelled the pools which lay among the sagging awnings of a circus above the town...

And it saturated the body of a girl which was slumped across the flimsy counter of a sideshow booth.

There was a garish red and yellow sign above the booth announcing: *Koko, The Naughty Clown — Pelt Him As Hard As You Like And Teach Him A Lesson! Twelve Shies A Shilling!* And then, sprawled forward through the plastic curtains which normally parted only to reveal the bobbing clown's head as it ducked to avoid the hurled balls of corn pressed cotton, was the body…

Below a tweed coat dark and sodden with moisture, the girl's head hung down over the front of the counter. Her hair, long and blonde, was tangled and matted by the rain. One arm was caught behind her by the curtain; the other, flung forward with the fingers of the hand outstretched, seemed in its despairing attempt to grasp nothing only to accentuate the lifelessness of the figure as a whole. Collapsed there in the gaudy framework of the booth, the girl looked like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

But there was visible evidence of a more sinister kind.

The lightweight cotton balls with which the clown in the sideshow was pelted were stacked in a bin behind the curtains. But on the muddy ground outside, three iron-hard wooden spheres from a neighbouring coconut shy lay wetly beneath the corpse's lolling head.

Although the circus was laid up for the winter in the big field at the head of the valley, the sideshows and amusement arcades were opened each afternoon to allow the proprietors to make some of their running costs from the townspeople and the occasional visitor during the close season. Towards the end of the morning, therefore, there was a stirring around the double line of caravans beyond the closed Big Top, and soon men and women were hurrying across the waterlogged grass to prepare the attractions for the coming day.

At twelve-thirty, a teenage boy shouted in astonishment into the wind, and a few minutes later there was a knot of people grouped around the kiosk home of Koko The Naughty Clown.

Shielding his face from the driving rain with an upraised arm, the boy hared back to the caravans. Two minutes later, he returned. Behind him, picking his way over the grass and ducking under guy ropes, an old man in a flat cap followed. Under the awning of a shooting gallery, there was a discussion going on, with gesticulation and argument. The man in the cap walked to an elderly Buick parked at

the far end of the field, coaxed the motor into life, and drove through the gate and down the road looping towards the huddle of wet roofs round the harbour.

Soon afterwards, the car returned, accompanied by a black police Wolseley. Helmeted constables in shining raincapes arranged a tarpaulin screen around the booth while an officer in a peaked cap with silver stars on his shoulders interrogated the circus staff.

Half a mile away, a man parked on a shoulder of the lane, climbed the bleak moorland towards Trewinnock Tor and focussed a powerful pair of Zeiss field glasses on the scene. By now another police car had arrived and he could see the occasional flare of photographers' flashbulbs from behind the screen. Faintly above the pounding of the rain on the car roof, the watcher heard the shrilling of bells. An ambulance lurched into the field and backed up to the booth. Later, a Fire Service salvage tender arrived, hesitated near the Big Top, and then turned and slowly crawled back down the hill into the town.

A policeman was standing at the gates trying to move on a sprinkling of those sightseers who materialise, like swallows on the first day of summer, anywhere in the world at the first hint of a disaster, private or public. Others shepherded members of the circus staff towards one of the caravans in which the officer with the silver stars appeared to have made his headquarters. Presently a third police car whined down the hill from the main road leading to Helston and disgorged three plainclothes men who quickly busied. themselves about the booth.

The man with the binoculars seemed to find all this of equal interest. Even when everyone had disappeared inside the caravan, the kiosk, or one of the other tents in the field, leaving only the massive figure of the constable at the gate, he continued to stare at the site, raking the flaps of wet canvas inquisitively from time to time.

The rain stopped eventually. The sightseers straggled away to lunch. Policemen crossed and recrossed the wet grass beneath the scudding clouds.

But it was only when white-coated ambulance men shuffled out of the booth carrying a sheeted figure on a stretcher that the watcher relaxed. Momentarily, his knuckles whitened around the eyepieces of the glasses. Then, when the ambulance doors had slammed shut and the vehicle had bumped over the field and out into the road, he sighed, dropped the binoculars back into a leather carrying case slung around his neck, started his car, turned round and drove slowly back

down the hill towards the town.

News of the death at the circus spread rapidly around the bars and cafés of the port, for a murder is a rare occurrence in a Cornish fishing village, and everybody felt sure the girl had met with foul play.

The ambulance men discussed it in the hospital canteen. The police surgeon, the county coroner, and the Chief Constable theorised in the smoking room of the Conservative Club. Local newspapermen enthused on the telephone over the event as they called the News Editors of the London dailies they represented.

And a fair-haired young man at the wheel of a sports car talked about it over a short-wave radio as he thundered southwest from the capital that night.

For the dead girl, besides earning a modest living as the holder of a sideshow concession at the circus, had also been working for an organisation based three thousand miles to the west across the Atlantic — an organisation identified by the curious initials of U.N.C.L.E.

CHAPTER TWO: MARK GETS SET

THE Crabbers' Delight at Porthallow is one of those peculiarly English pubs, bulging with horse brasses and copper pans and spurious souvenirs, which despite its Olde Worlde atmosphere still manages to attract a clientele of genuine locals. It stands just across the Hard from the Customs House, and behind it there is a green lawn sloping down to the bathing beach on the other side of the cove where customers sit and drink in the summer.

At lunchtime on the day after the discovery of the girl's body, the big general bar — which with a tiny "snug" comprised the whole of the inn's drinking quarters — was fuller than usual for a winter weekday. Fishermen in jerseys and peaked caps mingled with sober-suited bankers and shopkeepers from Fore Street and Harbour Road; several swarthy young men from the circus exchanged pleasantries with long-haired boys from the local tech; two bearded painters and their wives were being plied with gin by newspapermen from London.

In a beamed alcove bright with chintz and bottleglass, the fair-haired driver of the sports car who had arrived early that morning talked

with the landlord and a weatherbeaten individual in a yachting cap who said that he was the Harbourmaster.

The visitor's hair was brushed forward in the modern manner. His suede Chelsea boots were only slightly scuffed. And his suit, minus lapels and with a bright thread playing hide-and-seek among the checks, was sharp in the cool style that stopped just short of vulgarity.

"Journalist, eh?" the Harbourmaster was saying in his soft West Country voice. "You'm best be gettin' along over to them other fellers around the bar, then. Writin' chaps from London, all of 'em ... though what they think they'll get out of our painters, I don't know! Proper sponges they are."

The landlord was a nutlike little man obscurely ill-at-ease in his grey pinstripe. He would have been happier, one felt, in his shirtsleeves or a baize apron. He paused now, resting his weight on one foot, his hands full of the empty glasses he was returning to the bar, and stared at the young man as though he was seeing him for the first time. "Did 'ee want to be introduced then, sir?" he asked. "Silly of me not to have thought of it afore. You come right on over by there, and I'll —"

"No, really, thanks," the fair-haired young man interrupted. He seemed almost anxious not to meet the newspapermen from London. "We're — er — different branches of the profession, you see. Oil and water, you know. I'm here to work out a holiday feature on the southwest... you know: how to spend your money at home instead of abroad. That sort of thing. And they're all here, one imagines, because of the murder. News reporters."

"Right you are, my dear," the Harbourmaster said. "Never visit the place from one year's end to another — but at the first breath of scandal, the whole village is crawling with foreigners."

"Foreigners?"

"The English, he means," the landlord said. "To a Cornishman, any visitor from across the River Tamar is : I'm a Devonport man myself."

The Harbourmaster sighed and sank his nose into his tankard. "It's a bad business, all the same," he said a few minutes later, coming up for air. "Bring you a few more pints just now. But it'll be bad for business in the long run, mark my words."

"Local girl, was she?" the visitor prompted.

"Not to say local, my dear. Come from somewhere up north; Somerset way, I believe. But they'd been wintering here for several years now, and we'd begun to get used to them in a way. Even had boats, some of 'm."

"What was it all about? Do they know who did it?"

An invisible shutter dropped over the landlord's face. He reached for the Harbourmaster's tankard and turned away.

"Come now, gentlemen," the visitor urged. "The same again? Landlord? You'll take another pint with us, won't you?" He swung back to face the Harbourmaster as the licensee nodded reluctantly and threaded his way towards the bar. "You were saying...?" he persisted softly.

The man in the yachting cap shifted from foot to foot. "It's nothing, really," he said defensively. "You know what local gossip is in a place like this. Sheila Duncan was a pretty girl and she liked a good time... But it seems she'd settled down and was goin' steady with young Ernie Bosustow up along the circus when up pops Mister Right with his motor car, and his experience, and his money — ay, and his wife, too, if it comes to that."

"A triangle? Do you mean the motive for the murder may have been jealousy? But which one of the heavenly twins... Who is your Mister Right, by the way? The inevitable Older Man, I suppose."

He broke off as the Harbourmaster coughed loudly and turned aside. The man's seamed cheeks had gone brick red. Following the direction of his gaze, the young man saw that a police officer in uniform had come in with a distinguished-looking civilian — a middle-aged man with white hair, a lean and rakish face, and an impeccable weekend suit.

Waylaid as he was returning with their drinks, the landlord stood awkwardly passing the time of day with the newcomers. "Gentleman," he managed to interpolate at last, "I don't think you'll have met our latest guest... Mr. Mark Slate, from London. This is Sir Gerald Wright, Mr. Slate; and, of course, Superintendent Curnow of our local Force."

"From London?" the baronet drawled as he shook hands. "I must say this is the time of the year when we least expect visitors from what the locals persist in calling Up-along." His voice was deep and mellifluous.

"It's just right for me," Mark Slate said. "I'm a writer."

"A writer! How interesting! But not, I hope, one of those hatchet men trying to hack a story of national interest from our small local tragedy?"

Slate shook his head. "You can rest easy," he said with a smile directed more at the policeman than the other. "I'm strictly travel. No news for me, even if I do seem to have happened on a murder."

The superintendent was a big man with bushy black eyebrows almost meeting above a blade of a nose. He laughed now, showing a gleam of gold teeth, as he stripped off his wet raincoat and sank into a chair. "Here's where no news is good news, then!" he said. "For a moment there I was afraid you'd be another of those chaps badgering me for a quote. You know — the police are confident of an early arrest. That sort of thing... Or perhaps a simple first-person description of the scene of the crime!"

"It is a crime, then?" Slate asked casually.

"Oh, yes," the policeman said. "It's a crime alright."

"Come on, Curnow," Sir Gerald Wright called from the bar. "I've ordered up one of Bertie's special rum punches for us. You'd better help me bring them over, for the glasses are devilish hot!"

By the time they had settled themselves down in the alcove with their steaming grog, the Harbourmaster had left and the landlord was busying himself with customers waiting to climb the old oak staircase to the dining room on the first floor.

"What kind of travel stuff are you working on down here, Slate?" Sir Gerald asked. "Surely it's an odd time of the year to be doing that?"

"Not really," the young man said with a smile. "First week of January, every paper in the country carries a special issue on holidays, mostly foreign, with bags of features on the best places to go and so on, and page after page of ads tied in from the package tours and travel agencies. That's all over now and the time's right for a follow-up piece — after all the shouting what are we *really* going to do this summer? And what are the chances of spending a good holiday at home?... I think they're okay, specially around here, so I've come down to get some local colour at first hand."

"And what are your suggestions going to be, if one may ask?"

"Obvious enough. I shall just point out the advantages of this place, villages like Coverack, Cadgwith, Porthgwarra, Portscathe. Falmouth if you like the big towns. It's all been done before, but what the hell!"

"I shall look forward to seeing it. What paper are you doing it for?"

"A syndicate. Features people. I don't expect you've heard of them."

"Where do you hope to sell, then?"

"Oh," Mark said carelessly, "the glossies. You know."

Soon afterwards, Wright made his excuses and left and Slate was alone with the policeman.

"It must be nice always being in the swim — or even one jump ahead of fashion," Curnow said wistfully. "In a little place like this, it's only when some accident like this affair of the girl pushes us into the headlines that we realise how far behind the times we really are."

"Oh, I don't know. You've got permanence down here. And character. And much, much less of that terrible strain all the time that we have up there. That's one of the main points I shall make in my piece."

"If you don't mind my saying so," the superintendent observed suddenly, "that's a very splendid suit you have there. Really with-it, that is."

Mark smiled. "Think so?" he said. "It's from Carnaby Street, actually!"

"Ah, yes... Carnaby Street. We've read about that. I've even been there — but it's no good going to London or places like that as a tourist. You only feel more of a country bumpkin than ever. You have to *belong*..." The superintendent's voice tailed off dolefully.

"Look here," Mark said abruptly. "Have you lunched? No? Then why don't you have lunch here with me? Be my guest — and I can tell you one or two things about London that might change your metropolitan-slanted mind!"

Once they were settled upstairs in the panelled dining room with its ship's chronometer and its portholes and its nets on the wall, he set himself out to win the policeman's confidence, talking gaily and amusingly of life in a dozen of the world's capitals. It was not until they were sipping their brandy that he returned to the subject of the girl who had been murdered in the circus above the town. "I'd love to

know the way you set about a murder enquiry," he said. "I mean, really know what you actually think, when it's all starting."

Curnow's blue eyes twinkled shrewdly below his tangled brows. "You may not be a newsman now, Mr. Slate," he said, "but I guess old habits die hard, eh? Once a reporter, always a reporter!"

"Just call it simple curiosity," Slate grinned. "But I promise that nothing you tell me will in any sense be used for a newspaper piece. I can — er — safely say that I have no intention whatever of writing anything at all about the unfortunate young woman." He paused, smiled a small, private smile, and then swallowed the last of his coffee.

The policeman stared at him for a moment, and then went on: "After all, why not? It's supposed to help us clarify our ideas if we have a Watson — at least it does in the books…"

"I'm all ears," Slate said. "Let me get you another brandy first, though." He crossed to the bar, returned with the two glasses and signalled the waiter to bring them more coffee.

"This seems like a simple — in fact, rather a sordid — case of murder," the superintendent resumed when the man had poured and gone. "Gay girl works for a circus. Gay girl settles down when she meets poor but honest boyfriend also working at the circus. A marriage is arranged. Settled-down girl goes gay again when she meets rich sophisticate. Big trouble with honest B, who is madly jealous."

"Jealous enough to kill?"

"Possibly. That's what we have to discover. At any rate, gay girl ends up done in — either by her young friend out of jealousy, or by her older friend because she was becoming a nuisance and he was afraid his wife might find out."

"Oh, he's married then?"

"Aren't they always?"

"Yes, I suppose they are. You said the girl and her boyfriend both worked at the circus, didn't you?"

"I did. The boy's father owns the concern; his mother does the palmistry bit; a sister is the equestrienne; one brother acts as ringmaster and another has a candid-camera seaside snapshot

concession."

"Practically a family business, then?"

"Practically. There are a few hired hands — but the old man's tough about the money. They have to pay for their concessions, family or not. Most of these small travelling circuses are like that. Down here in the southwest, we're one of the few areas still rural enough to support them. You have to have a region where they'll go out to be entertained, where the box isn't in every village parlour... Where was I? — Oh, yes: the boyfriend himself. He's a nice enough lad, always seemed a bit of a tearaway, though. Villainous temper, too. He acts as general dogsbody around the circus in summer; takes the money and that. But in the winter he spends most of his time at his wheel, turning souvenirs for the girl to sell."

"What kind of souvenirs?" Slate asked.

"Oh... ashtrays, lighthouses, trinket boxes, Cornish pixies. You know."

"And the girl sold them?"

"Yes, she had a concession from the old man to run a little kiosk. Most of the boy's output was unloaded there — though some of the stuff's given away as prizes at the other sideshows. Most of it's Serpentine. Know what that is?"

"It's a hydrated silicate of magnesium, isn't it? Occurring in this part of the country probably as a rock vein formed by the metamorphosis of Dolomites or igneous extrusions rich in magnesium," Slate returned glibly.

Superintendent Curnow burst out laughing. "There was a saying when I was a lad," he exclaimed, "that you mustn't teach your grandmother to suck eggs. Sorry I underestimated your general knowledge! As far as I'm concerned, Serpentine is simply that mottled red and green stone that can be cut and turned and polished up a treat!"

"The girl," Slate pursued. "Was it her own booth where she was found dead?"

"Bless you, no. A sideshow operated by one of the hired help. He puts on a clown's rig and the local corner-boys let off steam by pelting him with balls of cotton wool. Gets rid of all their aggression, too!"

"And someone else had got rid of their aggression on the lady, in the

same booth?"

"Yes. Not with cotton wool missiles, though. There were three of those hard wooden balls from the coconut-shy beneath the body."

"Wooden and not woollen... Good Lord! You don't mean that she was killed... that somebody held her up and... and chucked... But that's horrible!"

"Murder's a horrible business, Mr. Slate, at the best of times. But that is what somebody wanted us to believe," Curnow said soberly.

"Wanted you to believe?"

The policeman nodded. "Metcalf, the police surgeon, has established that the cause of death was a severe blow on the head — it could have been any one of several he found on the frontal region and cranium," he said.

"And...?"

"The only thing is, there are four of these whacking great contusions, any one of which might have caused death — but only three balls."

Slate whistled quietly. "so maybe she was killed by the traditional blunt instrument — and the balls were thrown afterwards?"

"That's one possibility. Another is that the murderer hurled three balls, found that they hadn't done their job properly, and finished her off with your blunt instrument. A third is that he picked up one of the balls and threw it a second time... which seems to me unlikely, since there's a great pile of them at the coconut-shy, and it would have been quicker to have taken another of those than to have gone up to the kiosk and retrieved one of the original three. The pathologist's report — when we get it — should help sort that one out."

"Pathologist's report? Not the Home Office Pathologist? You're not calling in Scotland Yard?"

"No, Mr. Slate, we are not. That happens rather less in fact than in fiction. Mostly, the County Forces are quite capable of handling their own murders. And our equipment does include pathologists."

"My apologies. I stand corrected — and ashamed! It's a daunting thought, though, just the same — someone standing back and cold-bloodedly chucking those things at a live, or at the most

unconscious... Hey! Just a minute!" He paused in mid-sentence, his eyes wide.

Curnow nodded again. "Exactly," he said. "Chucking them at what? The girl wasn't going to stand up voluntarily as Aunt Sally for a madman. But there were no marks of ropes or bonds on her. Therefore she must have been either unconscious or dead when the balls were thrown — in which case someone else must have held her up as a target."

"Enter an accomplice, in fact."

"Exactly. And with two people involved, this grisly little scene becomes even more bizarre, don't you think?"

"I do. But why the set-up in the first place? If they really wanted you to think she was killed by the coconut-shy balls, surely they'd have been clever enough to have checked that there were the right number?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? As I see it, the girl must have been already dead before they thought of the idea. It must have been an improvisation. Otherwise minds tortuous enough to have conceived the idea at all would certainly have been sufficiently imaginative to have made it more believable."

"Yes, but why bother at all? Why use a booth in the first place?"

"There can only be two reasons: either as a pure red herring, or as a means of obliterating some clue to the murderer which lay in the blow already struck. The wound might have pointed to an identifiable instrument, perhaps, which could be linked only to one person."

"I see that; but it's still pretty odd, isn't it?"

Curnow laid down his empty coffee cup and pushed away his saucer. "It is that," he said. "For there are the break-ins as well, aren't there?"

"Break-ins?"

"Yes. The dead girl's booth — not the one where she was found, but her own place, the one where she sold the pixies — was broken into last night and again this morning, despite the police guard on the field."

"Good Lord! Was anything taken?"

"Not so far as we can see. And that makes it odder still. For you must admit that all this elaborate flummery with the coconut-shy, plus the matter of the burglarious entries — well, they hardly add up to the normal pattern you find in a crime of jealousy, now do they?"

"I guess not," Mark Slate admitted "But do they fit in with the personalities involved? Are either of the characters capable of this kind of thinking? Does your hot-tempered circus boy or his rival... who is the Other Man, by the way?"

The policeman rose to his feet abruptly. "Don't want to prejudice you with local gossip," he mumbled, sticking a pipe into his mouth and slapping at his pockets in search of matches. "Better if you kept an open mind, really. Maybe a fresh outlook would be a help. In the meantime, I'll be going up-along to have another word with the circus people in a few minutes, if you'd care to come with me."

Slate regarded him curiously for a moment. "I should like that very much, thanks," he said at length. "Being present at a real investigation will give me some splendid background material in case I should ever want to write one up in the future... Excuse me just a moment, will you, while I nip up to my room and fetch a waterproof?"

In the comfortable bedroom with its sloping ceiling and the mullioned window overlooking the harbour and the cliffs beyond, he snatched his raincoat from a hanger and took a contraption shaped like a large fountain pen from his inside breast pocket. Plucking the clip lying alongside its barrel, he slowly extended a miniature telescopic aerial and then raised the device towards his lips.

"Hallo? Hallo?" he said softly, thumbing a button on the instrument's side. "Slate to R.S.2, London. Are you with me? Over."

"*I hear you loud and clear*," a disembodied voice whispered from the tiny two-way radio in his hand. "*Over.*"

"Message for Waverly in New York, topmost priority," Slate breathed. "Elimination of our agent G.7. definitely villainous. Stop. Suspicions aroused but not, repeat not, confirmed that this is professional rather than personal. Stop."

He paused and looked out of the window. Rain was drumming on some projection of the roof below; there was a lather of surf fringing the granite face of the headland on the far side of the bay.

"*I am receiving you loud and clear*," the voice from the transceiver

reminded him "*Do you have anything more to add?*"

The agent started. "Sorry," he said. "Yes, I have. Message continues. Reluctance to sing characterises local reaction. Stop. In these circumstances, propose to follow up line of enquiry initiated by G.7 Stop. Will advise progress and cast list by cabled cipher tonight. Stop. Message ends... You'll get that off right away, won't you?"

"*Right away*," the voice repeated. "*Though Waverly won't even have started his breakfast yet!... Still, that'll be your worry when you want your expense sheet okayed! Over and out...*"

The man from the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement grinned, scooped his car keys off the dressing table, slung his coat over his shoulders, and left the room whistling.

CHAPTER THREE: THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE NO BUSINESS

WET canvas flapped mournfully in the rising wind as Curnow and Mark Slate pulled up between the Big Top and the lines of caravans. Close to, the living quarters of the circus staff presented a very different picture to that held by romantics of the Lavengro persuasion: far from being a collection of gaily painted wooden vehicles with stove pipe chimneys and yellow shafts, most of them were sleek, modern residential machines, tailored to the exigencies of a nomad life. A few of the caravans were expensively converted motor buses or vans, but the majority were aluminium-bodied trailers, some extraordinarily long, with heavy tow-bars for attachment to the collection of second-hand American cars which filled the parking lot at the bottom of the field.

Slate put one foot to the ground and eased himself up and out of a bright blue sports car shaped like a dart with a squared-off tail. The hardtop coupe body was slung completely between the wide-base wheels, with no overhang at front, back or sides, and the rear window couldn't have been more than five degrees off the horizontal.

The superintendent squelched across the wet grass from his Wolseley. "I say," he remarked admiringly, "that's quite a machine you have there, Mr. Slate. Fairly streaked up the hill, she did — and I can't say that I even recognise the marque. What is it then?"

"It's a Matra-Bonnet Djet, actually," the agent said, with that

deprecatory smugness common the world over to the owners of expensive machinery when approached by envious but idolatrous paupers. "As you say, she goes like the hammers. Best sports car the French have produced for decades. There are disadvantages, all the same. Vision's a bit restricted, for one thing, especially rearwards. For another, it makes a bit too much noise for comfort when some of your chaps are on the warpath! And of course it does get pretty warm in there — technically, I suppose it's a rear-engined car, but the motor's ahead of the back axle ... which means in practice that it's about a hundred and eighty degrees Fahrenheit just behind one's hip. The engine room's in that great hump between and behind the front seats there!" He slammed shut the wide door and they tramped over the muddy ground to wards the caravans.

The rain stopped and the sound of the sea rolled up from beyond the harbour as they climbed the steps of a huge trailer in polished aluminium. The garish slogan streaming across its front below the roof said, *Bosustow's Circus — All The Fun of the Fair on your Doorstep!*

Ephraim Bosustow, the proprietor, was a red faced man of 65 with a surly manner and twin tramlines of irritation scoring his brow.

He pushed away a sheaf of papers and rose to his feet as the Superintendent knocked to enter a living space as well designed and fitted with gleaming woods as the Captain's quarters on a flagship. "I've told 'ee afore, Mr. Curnow," he said in exasperation, "that I have nowt more to say. I already told your young feller everything there was to know 'smorning. And again yesterday, if it come to that, when you was by 'ere yourself. Can't for the life of me think what questions there are left to ask."

"Terribly sorry to trouble again," Curnow said soothingly. "But there *are* certain things we have to go over again and again. Murder is one of them. Now exactly what do you recall of the events leading up to the discovery of the body?"

"I told 'ee. Sweet damn-all. Being up late the night afore, I'd slept late — and the first thing I knew, young Tommy Bascoe was here, batterin' on the door and yellin' blue murder... Well, you know what I mean…"

"And you came straight out, went with him to the booth, and then drove down to the police station to report the murder?"

"After we'd had a bit of a chinwag, yes. But you know that."

"I only know what I've been told, Mr. Bosustow. What had you to

discuss? Why did you not come at once?"

"We don't get murders every day," the old man said sullenly. "Nobody knew quite what to do, who we ought to call."

"But you did know it was murder?"

"Now you're twisting what I say. Trust a ruddy copper! One of the reasons we rabbited so long was because we didn't know how she had died. There was nothing to show. Some of us wanted to move her and call a doctor; others said it might be foul play and we'd better leave her be."

Abruptly, Curnow varied his attack. "Miss Duncan was engaged to be married to your son," he said. "Did you approve?"

"My youngest son. I didn't approve or disapprove. Long as they paid me the rent for the concessions, their private life was their own affair."

"But you were upset when your prospective daughter-in-law was killed?"

"'Course I was upset. And then again I don't know how I'm goin' to get someone else to take over the souvenir kiosk at this time of the year. There's not a soul visiting the side- shows this month, the boy's been put off his stonework by some fool trouble or other, and your bloomin' town council duns me every week for some absurd sum for rent for this waterlogged field."

"I don't know," Curnow said, "you seem to be doing alright every time I pass. Plenty of people in — especially the kids."

"Rubbish!" the proprietor said angrily. "They come in to rubberneck, not to spend. I'm practically bankrupt, if you must know. There isn't an ounce of business left in this Godforsaken part of the country, not after September."

"I understand there had been trouble between Miss Duncan and your son over another man," Curnow said. "What was it all about? Is he so hotheaded?"

Bosustow shrugged. "I know nothing about their affairs," he said. "I told you, as long as they pay their debts, they're free to do as they like."

The old man stubbornly refused to be drawn any further on the

subject of his youngest son's impending marriage, his mercurial temperament, and his relations, good or bad, with the girl who had been about to become his wife.

"It's a rum go, Mr. Slate, if you ask me," Curnow said as they made their way to the caravan occupied by Bosustow's eldest son. "A very rum go. There's something funny about this affair, mark my words. We get a feeling in my business — and I feel sure there's something being held back here."

"By Bosustow himself, or in the circus generally?" Slate asked.

"All over," the policeman replied. "You see if I'm not right."

And in truth the reception they met with this time did nothing to confound his words. Harry Bosustow was as red-faced as his father, but stockier and even more ill-tempered to look at. He was sitting at a desk in the huge converted pantechnicon in which he lived, scowling at a strip of negatives which he was holding up to the light. More lengths of film were pegged to a line stretching from side to side of the caravan, and at the farther side of this a brassy blonde with too much makeup and bowed legs was totting up figures in a thick ledger. The sycamore panelling and fitted furniture was as sterile and impersonal as the neat home of Bosustow senior.

"You again!" the man said after they had knocked and entered. "I thought we'd seen the last of you. What more do you want to know?... And in any case, couldn't you do your cross-examination somewhere else? My wife, as you see, looks after the box-office and the general finances of this show — and there's an audit due at any day. So any questioning or cross-examination in here is bound to disturb her. And I do feel —"

"Look, Mr. Bosustow, cut that out," Curnow rapped. "This is a murder investigation and I don't give a damn about auditors or accountants or anybody else who attempts to get in my way. You seem to forget — all of you — that a woman has been done to death on your property. For all the signs of regret that I've seen, she might as well have been a stranger, but she was in fact almost a relative. I shall ask as many questions as I want — and if you know what's good for you, you and your brothers will answer them..."

The man shrugged angrily and threw down the strip of film. "People waiting for their prints," he muttered. "How can I build up a candid connection if I keep on being interrupted? Delivering on time's half

the battle in this game."

"I only have one question to ask you," Curnow said, repressing a smile. "People say your intended sister-in-law was two-timing your young brother with an older man, a local man with a lot of money. D'you know if that was true?"

"If it was, I never heard anything of it," the other growled. He picked up his negative again and ostentatiously turned his back on them. The blonde raised her eyes momentarily from her ledger and then looked down once more.

They next visited Sara Bosustow, who was swarthy, meatily built, with a fine down of moustache on her upper lip, and was the most obvious equestrienne he had ever seen, Mark thought. She was trying on a silver lace-up boot with the help of a flabby woman with glittering eyes whom he imagined must be Mrs. Bosustow senior, the palmist. In a corner of her trailer lounged a man whose waxed whiskers would have branded him as the ringmaster brother even had he not boasted the characteristic family expression of mulishness combined with bad temper. The confined space, in welcome contrast to the others they had visited, was a chaos of magazines, filled-up ashtrays, boots, tights, discarded girdles and brassieres, and spangled leotards.

None of them was particularly helpful, but neither was anyone hostile. In turn, they denied stoutly that their youngest brother was (a) bad-tempered, (b) quarrelsome, (c) the sort of person who would kill his fiancée in a fit of jealousy — especially in someone else's booth. The superintendent smiled his grim smile again. "We have witnesses who heard them at it hammer and tongs the night before she was found," he declared.

Sara Bosustow put her foot with the partly laced boot down to the floor. "I don't know why you bother," she exclaimed hotly, hands on hips. "Surely it's obvious to anybody that only one person could have killed Sheila? He'd been pestering her for weeks, he wouldn't take no for an answer, he was the last person to see her alive — and to top it all he's the only person she knew with a nasty enough sort of mind to dream up that trick with the balls from the coconut-shy!" She stood facing the policeman, her bosom heaving with anger and her small eyes flashing.

"Hush, Sara! You'm be gettin' yourself into trouble with talk like that," old Mrs. Bosustow said placidly. "I never did. Really, I never did!"

"Some things have to be said, Ma," the ringmaster interrupted. "I think Sara's right — and the more people know it the better. We've had enough trouble with fancy suitors and so-called gentlemen before, and just because Sheila was soft hearted enough not to choke off our self-styled squire..."

"Oh, Sir Gerald's all right really, son. Don't take on so," his mother soothed him.

"Sir Gerald!" Mark interjected involuntarily.

"Yes, Sir Bloody Gerald," Sara stormed. "Gerald Wright, the Don Juan of Penwith; despoiler of maidens with the blessings of his stuck-up wife; know-all; snob; and peeping-tom into the bargain, always prowling about with his blasted glasses!"

In the silence which followed this outburst, a scatter of rain drops was flung at the caravan window and sounded abnormally loud. Distant church bells trembled on the wind. Ceased.

"Ah, yes," Superintendent Curnow said, avoiding Mark's eye. "Half past three. That'll be Mary Trelawnay's wedding. Hope the weather clears up for her — they're going to the Scillies for the honeymoon... Come on, then, Mr. Slate. We'd best be on our way, too."

"Why didn't you say Wright was the other man?" Mark asked reproachfully as they tramped back towards the car park, the moist wind tugging at their coat tails.

Curnow had coloured slightly. "Just a lot of gossip," he said. "You don't want to be bothering your head about that. There's always two sides to a question. A woman scorned, you know... And besides I'm not sure that he really is Another Man in that sense, though the boy, Ernie will hardly agree with me! I'll just have a few words with Master Bosustow now, and then I must go."

But the youngest Bosustow's caravan was locked and empty. Curnow led the way across to the uniformed constable still on duty at the gate.

He told them that the dead girl's fiancé had spent the morning drinking, and had now gone back to the hut where he worked at his stone. "That's up on the southern slope of the Tor," Curnow said. "He's one of the ones who likes to work on it where it comes from. Most of the Serpentine specialists round here take a lease on a particular patch of ground, dig the stuff up and set up their little workshops right there, the way he does. I guess I'll have to put off seeing him until

later: there are some routine bits and pieces back at the station right now, so I'd better be leaving you for today."

Mark shook hands and walked back to the Matra-Bonnet. He waved goodbye to the police Wolseley and leaned down to open the low door of the sports car.

At that moment glass starred and shattered in front of his eyes. At the same time he was aware of the sting of flying fragments against his chin and the distant report of a firearm.

Almost in a reflex, he hurled himself to the muddy ground and peered up over the distant ridgepole of the Big Top towards the moors sweeping the sky behind the town. The shot — it had sounded like an express rifle to him — had come from somewhere over there. But the undulations of dead bracken and Cornish heath rolled up, ridge beyond ridge, towards the rocky escarpment of the Tor itself in featureless anonymity. Anyone using smokeless powder could lie low behind a rock outcrop and there remain undetected.

He shrugged mentally and clambered back into the car on the far side, away from the invisible marksman. If he hadn't leaned down just then to reach for the handle of the door, he thought, he'd probably still be on the grass, with a hole in his head... Shivering involuntarily, he stabbed fiercely at the accelerator and sent the car lurching out of the field on to the road leading to the town.

An hour later, after he had changed his soiled suit and set out on a little tour to see if he could discover where the youngest Bosustow worked, he was stamping just as heavily on the brake pedal. Following the directions given to him by one of the fishermen, he was climbing a steep lane towards the Tor when some sixth sense made him look upwards and over the bank overhanging the road. The shriek of the Matra-Bonnet's discs was drowned in the thundering progress of the great boulder of granite bursting through the hedge. It smashed a depression in the gravelled surface of the lane, bounced to the far side of the carriageway, and finally disappeared with a crashing of undergrowth down a slope into the valley.

Slate's knees were trembling as he whipped out of the driving seat and pounded up the bank down which the great rock had tumbled.

Beyond a screen of gorse and broom, the hillside stretched up to the grey sky in an unbroken line of rough grass and rock. Apart from the flapping of a pair of peewits in the middle distance, no living thing

disturbed the silence.

But although there wasn't a human being in sight, the evidence of someone's presence was not far off. To the right, the slope of the land was intersected twice: once by the roof of a small building carrying a wooden sign announcing: *Bosustow — Fine Work in Porphyry and Serpentine*; once, further away, by the gantries and reflectors of some kind of radar station.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN OVERSEAS MISSION FOR APRIL

"THAT is just the point, Mr. Solo," Alexander Waverly said to his Chief Enforcement Officer over the telephone in his office. "The crux of the matter is that Porthallow is the nearest town to the installation. The girl was only on a watching brief, of course, but it does look now as though there may have been something to watch." He listened for a moment, gazing out of the large window at the elegant tower of the United Nations building across the East River. Waverly, as Head of the Policy Department of U.N.C.L.E.'S Section One, always believed in giving a fair hearing to the opinions of the men and women who worked for him… and then doing exactly what he had intended to do in the first place anyway.

He waited courteously now while Napoleon Solo spoke. And then, "Yes," he said, "Mr. Slate is over there. From what I gather, the situation looks as though it may become more complicated before it clears up — if you see what I mean. I have just received a second message from him, relayed through London." He picked a cablegram absently from the top of the enormous desk and stared at the strips of teletype pasted to the form.

The voice in the receiver enunciated two crisp sentences. Waverly's lean, tired face creased into a smile. "Yes, Mr. Solo," he said. "That is exactly what I had planned to do, as it happens... Thank you. And you will let me know as soon as you leave Lima, won't you?"

He replaced the instrument gently on its cradle and pressed a button set in a wooden plate screwed to the desk.

"Yes, Mr. Waverly?" The girl's impersonally efficient voice came from a speaker concealed somewhere behind the panelling lining the office.

"Ah, Miss Soong," Waverly said into the air. "A couple of things for

you to do, if you please. Do you have your pad and pencil ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right... First, please cable Mr. Vrookluyt van Meerengen in Macao. Tell him that he is on no account to reveal himself to the authorities. On no account. He's strictly on a fact-finding trip and the less the Command gets mixed up in the thing the better."

"Very good, Mr. Waverly."

"Secondly, telephone General Hartz at the Pentagon and tell him the golf game is on. I'll send a chopper — er, a helicopter — to fetch him tomorrow morning at ten. Thirdly, cable Mr. Illya Kuryakin at the Hotel Ambassador in Vienna and tell him request for 48 hours special leave is granted — but that I shall expect him to report back to Section Two here on Monday morning. Fourthly..." He hesitated.

"Yes, sir?"

"Fourthly, please ask Miss April Dancer to come in to see me right away."

The girl shown in by Waverly's Chinese secretary a few minutes later was dark-haired and dark-eyed. Below the soft bang, her face with its full-lipped, generous mouth was warm yet alert. Her golden suede suit, whose fringed "pioneer" motif was repeated at the tops of her high-heeled boots, was richly moulded to the curves of her body.

Despite her glamorous appearance, however, April Dancer was as courageous and resolute as any of the operational elite who formed the Command's Section Two. A New England college graduate, she was fluent in a dozen languages, a first-class sportswoman and the holder of a pilot's licence, besides being one of the half dozen general assignment agents whom Waverly privately rated as the best of his hand-picked bunch.

She was also rumoured to be so dedicated to her job that she had steeled herself against anything more than the mildest flirtation with the personable young men who engaged, from time to time, her normal and healthy interest. Indeed, Section One's Head of Policy had once described her as having "a high I.Q., absolute emotional stability, and a scintillating animal vitality." Perhaps fortunately, Miss Dancer herself was unaware of this fact.

As she sat down now on the opposite side of his vast desk, Waverly

again observed with pleasure the lithe grace with which she leaned back and crossed her legs as she waited for him to speak. She placed a large black crocodile handbag on the floor by her chair and crossed gloved hands patiently in her lap.

Waverly cleared his throat. "As I understand from Mr. Solo that you are — er — unoccupied for the moment, Miss Dancer," he began, "I should like you to go to England tonight and take over a little investigation from Mr. Slate. The affair has a complicated enough background, so — at the risk of boring you — I propose to spend a few minutes filling you in as the British say."

Setting his glasses on his nose, he crouched forward over the cablegram he was still holding in one hand and added:

"What do you know of Cornwall county, in the southwest of England?"

"Moors, china clay and abandoned tin mines inland," the girl replied; "crabs, lobsters, cliffs and picture postcard fishing villages living off tourists on the coast." Her voice was firm, melodic and fairly deep.

"Yes, that's all right as far as it goes," Waverly persisted, "but I was really talking — ah — professionally. In particular of the southern tip of the county, around the Lizard Point."

"Oh. You must mean the big radar base near Helston... Goonhilly Downs, I think it's called."

"Pronounced G'nilly, I believe. But although the British do have a fairly extensive top-secret tracking station there, it was really another name I was after. A few miles nearer Falmouth, just behind one of your picture postcard villages called Porthallow, is Trewinnock Tor."

April Dancer expelled her breath in a sigh of mild irritation. "Of course!" she said. "The big new NATO installation. I should have known at once. I saw something about it in the Stop List on classified locales yesterday."

"Exactly. Behind the rocky moors leading to the Tor itself lie the masts and towers and dugouts of what the Americans call E.C.10 — the lynch-pin of NATO'S chain of DEWS stations… probably the most sophisticated, and most experimental, of all the bases in Europe. Now while we are in no way responsible for the security of the Western Powers' Distant Early Warning System, being affiliated as you know neither to East nor West, we are interested in the maintenance of the balance of power between them — and one of our main tasks is to see

that nothing untoward disrupts this to the advantage of one or the other."

The girl was leaning forward in her chair now, her eyes fixed on his face, drinking in every word of the briefing.

"I therefore thought it... expedient... when rumours and reports of espionage and/or attempted sabotage at Trewinnock Tor came to our ears," Waverly continued, "to do a little investigating. We had an agent, a part-time agent, working out of London. Her name was Sheila Duncan and in the London Headquarters listing she was identified as G.7."

"*Was* identified?" the girl queried.

Waverly nodded. "Miss Duncan's cover was running a sideshow at a travelling circus — the kind that's known here as a carnival. In this way she was able to keep thoroughly mobile and at the same time patrol fairly regularly the country areas where military establishments tend to be. Until recently, her assignment was just to keep her eyes and ears open and report to us anything unusual."

"And recently?"

"Recently, since the circus winters at Porthallow, I instructed her to make certain specific investigations relating to Trewinnock Tor."

"You still haven't explained that past tense, Mr. Waverly."

Waverly smiled bleakly. "Sheila Duncan was found dead in a circus sideshow the day before yesterday," he said. "She had been murdered in a somewhat bizarre fashion."

"In the course of duty? Had she reported back before she was killed?"

"Oh, yes. Several times. For reasons which I need not pursue now, she had become convinced that neither European, Middle Eastern nor Far Eastern powers were at the moment interesting themselves in the Tor. Yet the rumours did appear to be well-founded... which left us with the possibility that the espionage, and any projected sabotage, might be the work of THRUSH, who could certainly use the secrets of E.C.10 directly for their own underground armies as well as profiting indirectly from the mutual suspicion between the great powers if anything — er — happened to the station."

"She'd neither checked out nor disproved this theory before she died?"

April Dancer asked.

"No. Which is why I sent Mark Slate down to Porthallow the moment I was informed of the murder. Slate's briefing was, simply, to check whether the girl's death was a murder unconnected with her work for us, or an assassination arising directly from it. In other words, had she found out too much? If it was the latter, naturally he was to take up the trail where she left off."

"Is such a murder — however bizarre — likely to be unconnected with an agent's work?" the girl queried.

"It is a possibility that has to be taken into account. Especially with part-time operatives, the screening on personal life cannot possibly be as rigorous or continuous as that under which you labour here." Waverly smiled. "There's always a chance. We never really know the full truth about how such agents pass their time off-duty, you know."

"I suppose not. What has Mark turned up, anyway?"

"Considering the background, he's not done too badly. You know the Cornish are originally an Iberian people, like the Welsh, the Western Scots, some of the Irish and the Bretons?"

"Of course. Thought to have come originally from Phoenician stock, with a dash of throwback to the parent root when the Armada was wrecked off the western coasts of Britain in 1588," April said.

Waverly stared at her for a moment. "Yes," he said. "Well. They still regard the rest of England, let alone Scotland and Wales, as foreign, you know. And they are, as a whole, a fairly brooding, suspicious lot of people — insofar as one can ever generalise on a whole race. The saying goes that the Cornish spend the winter indoors, counting the money they've wrested from the summer tourists and only venturing out when there's a ship wrecked on their coast whose cargo they can plunder."

"All the same, I agree that this kind of generalised myth —"

"Yes, Miss Dancer. Yes, yes. I was only jesting," Waverly said crossly. "It's not only in Section Two that a sense of humour is permitted."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"Now where was I? — Oh yes. In such an unpromising atmosphere, then, Mr. Slate considered that he would not get far, as a 'foreigner',

simply by asking questions of the locals. They clam up at once in front of strangers. So he managed to ingratiate himself with the local police superintendent."

"Bully for Mark!"

"Er — quite. He has discovered that the girl was selling ashtrays and such tourist trivia in her booth as cover; and that these were cut and turned from local stone by her fiancé, the son of the circus proprietor. The youth, it seems, is insanely jealous of another, older, richer, more sophisticated suitor, who, besides being married, is some kind of local squire — and it is the squire who was the last to see the young woman alive. The boy, on the other hand, was heard to quarrel violently with the girl (presumably over the squire) not long before this. In other words, whichever way you look at it, it may turn out to be simply a *crime passionelle*. There are however certain aspects…"

Waverly picked the cablegram from the desk again and studied it. He sighed. "Mr. Slate's second message," he said, "affords some interesting reflections. Firstly, the older man's wife apparently knew about the friendship with Miss Duncan and did not object to it — which would seem to restrict him somewhat as a suspect; secondly, the dead girl's booth has now been burgled *three* times since the murder, although nothing, it seems, is missing; and thirdly, there have been two attempts on Mr. Slate's own life..."

The girl gave an unladylike whistle. "If that's what goes on in the villager there," she said, "I'd hardly fancy visiting the towns!"

"Precisely. The matter is complicated. That is why I wish you to go tonight to take over the investigation from Mr. Slate. He will remain and collaborate with you as long as may be necessary... You are quite satisfied with him as a colleague, I take it?"

"Perfectly. There is nobody I would rather have — on this or any assignment, Mr. Waverly."

"Splendid. It looks as though he may be on to something, anyway, if attempts are being made on his life. Perhaps by the people who keep burgling the sideshow booth. That suggests to me an attempt, so far unsuccessful, to locate some object, presumably incriminating, and remove it before it is found either by Mr. Slate or the police... Anyway, you had better go now to Operations and draw the necessary equipment, documents, money and so on. They will furnish you with papers detailing your cover and some further background on the

assignment. Please keep in constant touch with HQ London by radio. They will service me."

"Very good, sir. How do I go, by the way?"

Alexander Waverly gave her something very like a grin. "I have found it increasingly difficult to maintain our 'disengaged' image," he said, "when I am constantly borrowing aircraft from the Navy Department in this country. It looks to outsiders as though we are an American-sponsored organisation — although in fact I would cheerfully borrow Soviet or Chinese planes if they were geographically as convenient. But it does look bad, one has to admit… so I have at last persuaded our Appropriations Committee to advance me a sum sufficient to purchase for the Command a Trident — a quiet and comfortable jet ship that is very fast. Our standby helicopter will take you from the rooftop here to La Guardia. The new Trident will ferry you to London. And local Headquarters there will get you to the small airfield at Land's End in a Cessna."

He rose and held out his hand. "Good luck, my dear," he said.

There was something strangely forlorn, unnatural even, about him standing there, April thought, patting the pockets of his baggy tweed suit. He looked quite lost for a moment. And then suddenly it clicked... His pipes! There wasn't a pipe in the place — and usually they filled the mantel, sprawled across the desk, overflowed the coffee table and littered every surface in the huge room...

"Your pipes!" she was startled into exclaiming aloud. "Where are they? There's not one to be seen!"

Waverly looked guilty. "Er — I've given up smoking," he said sheepishly. "Doctor insisted. Bad for the health, you know. Not used to it yet."

April smiled fondly. Throughout the Command, Waverly and his multitude of pipes were perennial in-jokes — for although he was eternally filling them, one after another, he had never been seen actually to light one, nor had anyone in the organisation ever seen him take a single puff of tobacco!

"I think your courage is beyond praise," she said gravely. She picked up the big crocodile handbag, smiled at him again, and walked gracefully to the door.

CHAPTER FIVE: IN THE STEPS OF THE DEPARTED

MARK SLATE took the Matra-Bonnet over the moorland road from Land's End airfield, near Sennen Cove, towards Penzance. Reclining beside him in the black leather passenger seat, April Dancer listened with half-closed eyes as stage by stage, he recounted the events of the past forty-eight hours. After the monotonous drones of aircraft, the whine of the sports car's gears, the variable crackle and snarl of its exhaust, seemed to her to be paradoxically soothing and restful.

They had just negotiated a saddle in the high ground from which they could glimpse the Atlantic behind them, with the English Channel only a few miles ahead, when the girl suddenly opened her eyes wide and leaned forward. "But this is fabulous," she breathed. "Why did nobody tell me the place was beautiful too?"

Before them, the moor undulated down in a series of dun ridges streaked with ochre and burnt sienna and gamboge. Beyond this, where the ribbon of road stitched together a patchwork of woods and small fields to cover the outcrops of granite, the swell of country was dramatically gashed by a steep valley at whose father end a wedge of blue sea appeared. For the moment, the bad weather had withdrawn eastwards, and the pale sunshine flooding from the sky bared every detail of the winter landscape, from the moss on the nearest boulder to the white horses decorating the vee of water framed by leafless trees at Porthcurne.

Slate flicked a glance at the enraptured girl, grinned, and pushed the gear lever into third for the steep descent. "Out of season's the time to come," he said. "That's what the Cornish themselves tell you. I always imagine this is rather like the coast of Maine — you come from New England, April, don't you? — or even Massachusetts around Cape Cod. Am I right?"

"Oh, no," the girl laughed. "Cape Cod's quite wild sometimes, weather-wise, but Maine's much quieter than this — and anyway both of them are far more... well, kind of cosy, than this. Nearer to the stockbroker belt, too. This is so empty and so big!" She flicked aside her hair with an imperious jerk of the head and settled back in the seat. "You'd better fill me in (I think that's what Waverly said) on the rest of the details. What was this bit about your local squire's wife being a complaisant one, by the way?"

"Willco. Roger and out," Slate drawled in a burlesque Oxford accent.

"Some investigators are made, not born — and this bird just dropped into my lap, as you might say. Not literally, of course. Not during office hours. But she did drop."

"Perhaps a little background first," April prompted.

"Right. Well, there's this chap… kind of a squire type — clean-limbed, rakish face, old but good tweeds, early middle-age. And the gent appears to have been doing a line with our Sheila, dazzling her with his worldliness and so forth. So much so that her fiancé, the son of the circus, has a stand-up row with her about the man, threatening to do her in if she doesn't cut the said squire out. So much so that S.S. himself is the prime suspect in the eyes of many, he being the last person to have seen her alive."

"What would his motive have been — according to these many?"

"Well, that's just it, love. To stop his wife finding out *about une petite affaire* that had become too clinging and too troublesome — and therefore too dangerous. Only as it happened she knew already. And didn't mind, as I say."

"Now tell me how you know that."

"I was sitting in the Crabber last night — that's the pub where I'm staying — and I got into conversation with this woman. You know how it is."

"Yes," April said. "I know how it is."

"She was very much the county type — tall, you know, with that kind of ageless fair hair and rather well made-up. Good figure. Good conversationalist — and quite witty, too, as a matter of fact —"

"What was she wearing?" April interrupted.

"Waisted tweed jacket over a white polo-neck sweater, with jodhpurs and a cute little velvet cap. I think she had been out riding."

"You must be joking! ...Still, that would no doubt make the point she wanted to give satisfactorily."

"Look, you haven't even seen... Oh, never mind! Anyway, the conversation veered round to the local murder. All conversations here do, as you'll no doubt find out! And she said something like: 'Gerry — that's my husband — was rather fond of the girl. They used to see a

lot of each other and they'd been as thick as thieves for months.' And I said: 'But don't you mind?' And she said no, she and her husband had an Understanding; each could go their own way, she said, and make whatever friends they liked. And if anyone specially attracted them, she said, they were free to react as they wished. And then she asked could she buy me a drink..."

"Oh, Mark, Mark!" April laughed. "Don't ever change, will you?" -

"Well, anyway, when I found out from the barman that 'Gerry' was Sir Gerald Wright, suspect number one in the case, and that he and his wife lived in a big house on the moors above the town, well, I thought it prudent to sit tight and hear what she wanted to tell me."

"How do you mean — what she wanted to tell you?"

"Well, all this was very nice — but it was just the tiniest bit contrived, you know. The dear lady came into the bar and sat down three tables away from me. She went to powder her nose — and when she came back she sat down only two tables away. Later she went to the bar itself and returned to ensconce herself at the next table to mine. And then, when a waiter came up, she asked him a question she knew very well he couldn't answer — but I could. Something about London. Naturally, he turned to me to ask. Naturally I replied — and there we were, talking. It was beautifully done, but it was a set-up."

"I see," April said slowly. "And what do you think it was that she wished to plant on you? The fact that her husband had no motive for murdering Sheila?"

"No, I don't think so. After all, how could she possibly know that I was investigating the killing — or even that I was interested in it? My mate Superintendent Curnow would have been the obvious recipient for that line."

"True. Perhaps she just arranged the meeting for the obvious reason: your animal attraction."

"You're very kind. But seriously, I believe she did have an — er — ulterior motive—"

"That's what I just said."

"— other than the obvious one. And I think she has already achieved her objective."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I think the bit about her husband and Sheila was simply a conversational gambit — one of several she made — and that the real purpose of the operation was just to scrape an acquaintance with me."

"But why, Mark?"

"We shall know later. Phase One was to get to know me. Having gained that objective, she was too clever to press further. But I'm certain that, in some way or another, the acquaintance is going to be exploited soon."

"You realize what that would imply, though, don't you?" April objected. "If anybody bothers to employ a *subterfuge* to get to know you — apparently just a newspaperman on assignment — then they must know, or suspect, that you are not what you appear to be."

"There's a possibility that I may be blown already. I know." He sighed.

"But good heavens, how? Who could possibly have found out?"

"That's what we have to find out, April."

"Yes. And that brings us back to Square One, doesn't it? If they — whoever *they* are — do know about you, then the woman *might* have had a reason for sowing the idea that her husband couldn't have killed Sheila, don't you see? For in that case she *would* in fact know that you were investigating the murder."

Slate was silent for a few minutes as he drove the car expertly through a series of tight bends which followed the course a stream along the bottom of the valley. He was frowning when he spoke again. "You're quite right, of course," he said. "The corollary is so simple that it had escaped me. But it adds up to the same thing: we must view any future contacts with the lady — or with her husband, for that matter — as potentially dubious. For the time being, at any rate... And that brings me to a suggestion I was going to make regarding your own *modus operandi*."

"Which is?"

"That as we have to allow for the possibility that I may be blown, it's obviously going to be much better if there's no apparent connection between us. If I'm suspect, obviously any stranger I'm seen with is also suspect."

"Of course."

"So, although it's going to be inconvenient, I propose that we act as though we had never met, once we get to Porthallow."

"Pass each other in the street with our respective noses in the air?"

"Precisely."

"Make like our beautiful friendship had never been?"

"Even so."

"Well, in that case you'd better drop me off somewhere before we get there, so that I can arrive independently by bus or something."

"If you bail out in one of the back streets of Helston and catch a bus, there's a train from London that you *could* have come by, a few minutes earlier," Mark said. "The bus will land you in Porthallow at four-thirty... Look, there's the fishing village called Mousehole down there. You can see why it's on every Cornish picture postcard and souvenir ashtray in the book, can't you! We'll be in Penzance in a few minutes."

He went over his actions since he had arrived from London, hour by hour, as they threaded their way through the grey streets of the town, skirted the great bay islanding the fortress village of St. Michael's Mount, and drove past the bleached waste of Prah Sands.

"But tell me, Mark," the girl asked — they had turned inland now, across the checkerboard of farming country where the sky above the bare branches was black with rooks — "tell me about these two attempts on your life. Do you think they were made just because you were with the policeman? Has anyone tried to get at him? Or do you read them as further evidence that you're blown?"

"Oh, Point Number Three. Definitely. The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced. Even in the short time I've been talking to you about the affair, I've become practically certain of it. And anyway, nobody *has* taken a pot-shot at Curnow, so why try to bend an unknown assistant unless you have some further reason for rubbing him out?"

"Yes, that makes sense, I'm afraid. Have you found out anything about the attempts themselves? How they were worked, I mean."

"As much as one can. The shattered window on the car has been taken out — witness the draught howling in over my arm! — and I retrieved the slug from the door trim on the other side. I don't want to tip off Curnow that there's anything out of the ordinary about me — at least not yet — and so I can't very well get the bullet to a ballistics expert down here. From my own limited knowledge of the subject, I should judge that the gun was an express rifle, as I suspected — probably a Mannlicher — that it had been fired something over a thousand yards away, and that, if you produced the line between the place where the bullet lodged in the door and the opposite window where it entered, it would slant up over the tents to the moor above the town."

"And would the place where this line hit the moor be a thousand yards away?"

"Give or take a hundred in each direction, yes. But it doesn't really help: there's an awful lot of moor, and a great deal of it's a thousand yards away from the circus field! A two degree error in the arrival line of the slug — even if I'd estimated it, which I didn't — would give you a quarter of a mile or more up among those rocks. It was useless looking — and it could have been anybody, anyway. Anybody but Curnow, that is: he was with me!"

"And the case of the rolling stone?"

"Easier to pinpoint what happened; just as difficult to pin it to a person. The boulder was one of those local rocking stones. It had been perched about fifty yards above the road, on the hillside — just far enough for it to get up speed as it burst through the hedge and took the bank. Someone had worked it almost over with crowbars — you can see the marks in the turf — so that the smallest push would topple it down the slope when required."

"But how did they know when it would be required?" she frowned.

"Given the fact that my cover is blown in some way, it's not so very mysterious. First, they would be watching me any way. Secondly, if it was known that I was professionally interested in Sheila's death, it was a reasonable bet that I'd be going to see her fiancé — and the lane is the only road to his hut, where he spends most of his time. Thirdly, I hadn't been especially discreet about hiding the fact that I wanted to see the boy — at that time, there was no need to be. Fourthly, this car is somewhat distinctive and the lane is in full view of the place where the rock was. All they had to do, once they knew I'd be going there, was wait."

"Even so, it's a pretty crude, imprecise method of trying to… I mean, compared with a high-powered rifle, it's a bit of a hit or miss —"

"I know what you mean," Mark interrupted. "But it's not all that bad if you think of it merely as a means to try and frighten someone off."

"Oh, you think that's what it was?"

"I think it might be. The rifle shot could have been a deliberate near-miss for the same reason. When you think of it, the boulder idea is so *melodramatic*, so unscientific, so unlikely to succeed because there are so many variables — the car's speed, the boulder's speed, the terrain, the direction, for example — that it would seem absurd for anyone to try it if they seriously wished to kill or maim their victim. In particular for the sort of person who dreamed up the rifle idea and the coconut-shy routine."

"I see. Any idea of the perpetrator, just the same?"

"It's wide open. Practically the whole town used that road yesterday afternoon for some reason! It leads to the Coverack road over the Tor."

"Could they all have done the trick with the stone?"

"Most of them could! The hut where the fiancé turns his Serpentine lighthouses is a couple of hundred yards away; Wright's house is just over the brow of the hill, looking towards the radar station; Curnow used the lane only a few minutes before me, on his way to St. Keverne; the landlord of the pub brought some stuff down it in a shooting brake just after lunch. Even the Harbourmaster was out walking, it seems!"

"How many of them could physically have done it, time wise?"

"Provided they had already loosened the boulder in anticipation, any of them."

"Oh, dear," the girl said. "Dead end. What do you suggest then?"

"I suggest you leave that to me. It'll already be known that I'm meddling in something, anyway. So far as you're concerned... What did you say your cover was?"

"I hadn't yet. New Zealand girl, ex-university graduate, ex-barmaid, working her way round the world, on the lookout for any employment. Waverly hoped the antipodean bit might excuse any

departures from the norm in my English accent!"

"But that's perfect!" Mark exclaimed. "Old Bosustow was complaining every five minutes how difficult it would be to find someone to take over the booth Sheila had, at this time of the year. With that background, you can quite legitimately go and see him and ask if he's any work. You've come to the southwest because London's too cold for you in the winter.

"And when he says he hasn't anything, but there's a concession you could operate — well, you can say you have a little money saved, or offer to pay later, or give him a percentage of the take... anything, so long as you don't appear too eager. Then, if only you could get installed in Sheila's place, we could take it from there: the booth's as good a place as any to start, so long as we restrict any double appearances, as it were, to after dark! Maybe we could even solve the mystery of the burglars who take nothing!"

"Yes. I think that's a good idea," the girl said. "At least, I'll give it a try. Where did Sheila live, by the way?"

"She rented a small two-berther from the old man. I guess you could have the same caravan if the deal comes off. And talking of coming off, here's where you'd better think of getting off. This is Helston."

The streets of the market town were bordered by wide channels carrying the brick-red waters of a stream, and after the granite and slate of Penzance the whole place seemed warm and pinkly bustling in the afternoon light. April extricated herself from the Matra-Bonnet's passenger seat, reached in for her suitcase and the black crocodile handbag, and leaped nimbly across the surging gutter to the sidewalk.

"You can pick up the bus down the first side street to the left," Mark called as he leaned over to shut the door. "It'll be labelled 'Falmouth via Porthallow' — and the fare'll cost you half a crown — if you know what that is!"

"Thanks. I'll keep in touch by radio — but you watch out for ladies in jodhpurs in bars!" the girl called.

There was a momentary squeal as the wide Michelins bit into the asphalt, two small puffs of smoke — and the blue car was rocketing towards an intersection and the main road to Falmouth and the east.

CHAPTER SIX: THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS WRONG

THERE was nothing to show the casual passer-by that Mark Slate was in the middle of a two-way radio transmission. He sat slumped in the driving seat of his car, apparently gazing idly at the folds of moorland sweeping down to Porthallow and the twin curves of breakwater enclosing its harbour. To the more inquisitive, venturing closer to the lay-by on the slope of Trewinnock Tor where he was parked, he would have presented the picture of a young man intent upon some task for which he had specially stopped. For there was a notebook, open at a page half covered with handwriting, propped against the steering wheel — and he was toying with what looked like a rather fat pen.

What would have been invisible to such a watcher was the thin, telescopic antenna projecting beyond the barrel of the device. For Mark was in fact engaged with April Dancer on a remote-control check of Sheila Duncan's booth at the circus.

After some argument and haggling, the girl had succeeded in persuading the older Bosustow to let her take over the souvenir kiosk temporarily, and now, just after the afternoon opening of the sideshows, she was busy checking the stock. Since she was not supposed to know Mark, and since the booth was too small to conceal anybody, they had decided to maintain radio contact while she was actually there rather than compare notes in secret some time later in the day. "It's really more practical that way," April had argued. "Always better to discuss things as they come up than to try and recall every detail afterwards. And since I can't hide you inside, and you won't have any excuse for lounging about outside because you don't know me, I think our U.N.C.L.E. Communicators are the answer, don't you?" Slate had agreed, stipulating only that his end of the operation should be out in the country rather than in the town, where his actions might be noticed visually, or in his hotel room, where he might be overheard. He listened now to April's description of what she had found on the shelves and in the cupboards of the tiny booth.

"She had stuff in Serpentine, Onyx, Porphyry, Agate and Chrysopase, as far as I can see," she said; "the great majority of it being Serpentine. And it's fairly obvious, both from the books, such as they are, and from the stock, that lighthouses in Serpentine are the best sellers — in all sizes, from a couple of inches high to almost a foot. Next on the list are ashtrays — in the green Serpentine, the red, and in Moss Agate. And after that come various kinds of creatures, Cornish pixies mostly."

"What are they made of?" Mark asked curiously, raising the Communicator to his lips after a cautious glance around.

"Chrysoprase and Onyx, chiefly the former. They're pretty stylised, mind you, with very little detail: none of those minerals lend themselves to the kind of sentimental work that pixies normally demand. And in any case they are not suitable for mass production techniques — even the kind where each item is made separately!"

"Tell me one thing," Mark queried. "What the devil is Chrysopase?"

The voice percolating through the tiny Communicator in his hand sounded amused. "It's a green variety of Chalcedony — which, as I'm sure you must know, is a kind of semi-precious quartz... Apart from these, there are eggcups and small vases in Serpentine, trinket boxes in Serpentine and Agate, and paperweights — very classical in style — made in everything. May I keep you something, sir?"

"What are the pixies like?"

"They look as though they had leprosy."

"Oh. Perhaps I'd better —"

"Hold it Mark," April's voice interrupted. "I have customers. This is the third today. Business is booming! I shall leave the Communicator on so you can hear — but don't for goodness' sake say anything."

He heard a Cornishwoman's voice saying something indistinct. And then April, very clearly: "Yes, they are pretty, aren't they, dear?... No, the big ones are rather expensive, I'm afraid... Three pounds ten... Yes, of course, I understand... These small ashtrays are nice for a casual present; come in handy at any time. And they're only twelve and six. Just as you like... Yes, you do that…"

"No sale, I gather," he said when the girl came on the line again.

"No. I didn't really — Oh. Hold on again. There's this youth has been hanging about for some time: Now he's coming over. Can't say I like the look of him much. Keep quiet... Good afternoon, sir. Can I help?"

This time, the voice was clear and well-defined. A Londoner, or at any rate from the Home Counties, Slate thought. Not too well educated, but self-confident, almost cocky.

"Hullo, love. I'd like a Cornish pixie, please. In black Porphyry."

"In black...? A pixie? Just a moment, I don't think... Will you hold on a minute, sir. I'll just have a look."

Over the diminutive transmitter, Slate heard the sound of whistling overlaid by the opening and shutting of drawers and cupboard doors. And then the girl's voice, puzzled: "I'm so sorry, sir. I'm afraid we don't have any pixies in Porphyry, black or otherwise. Can I interest you in —"

"No, it's a pixie, in black Porphyry," the boy cut in.

"Well, I'm terribly sorry... We do have Porphyry ashtrays. Black and red, as you see. And stud boxes."

"Are you sure you don't have black Porphyry pixies?"

"Well, yes. I've just told you, haven't I?"

There was a short silence, and then the youth's voice mumbling: "Okay, okay. Have it your way. You don't have any. But they definitely *said*..." The voice died away as he walked out of range of the set.

"That was odd," April's voice said a few minutes later. "Look — there's a big cupboard full of odds and ends at the back of the booth. I think I'll sort through that in the next few minutes. There may be notebooks, papers, or at any rate something of interest to us there.. though if Miss Duncan had been as thoroughly trained as we have to be, I doubt it very much!"

"Okay," Mark replied. "You do that. While you're making a start, I shall take off and move the car somewhere else. I don't want to stay too long in any one place, in case people start noticing. As it is, half the wretched population down here seem to have field glasses!"

He drove back into the town and out along the track skirting the harbour and the bathing beach. On top of the headland separating Porthallow from the adjoining cove, he pulled off the road and stopped the car in a grassy depression. Beyond the clifftop, the white shapes of gulls floated in an up-current of air against the haze merging sea and sky in the winter sun. After he had switched off the engine, he listened to the booming of surf somewhere out of sight below and then drew the Communicator from his pocket and touched the button which would actuate the call-sign bleep on the twin that April had.

"Channel open," the girl's voice came crisply from the tiny speaker.

"Slate. I'm up on the cliffs on the other side of the town."

"Good. I've been busy too. I've sold a small round stud box in Agate since you called, and two lighthouses. Only the smallest, mind, but it's a start, don't you think?"

"Most commendable," Mark said dryly.

"And there's another funny thing too. Remember you heard the boy who asked for a black Porphyry pixie? Well, someone else came up and asked had I one."

"That is odd. Who was it? Did they ask in the same words?"

"A spotty young man of about twenty-two, I should judge. He didn't ask right out. Just wanted to see things in black Porphyry. And when it turned out that there were no pixies, he lost interest and went away."

"So what's so special about pixies in black Porphyry, one wonders? You have checked? There really are none?"

"Yes and no. Respectively."

"April — you don't think this is... a sign?... do you?"

"Like From Above, you mean? Or like an omen, a pointer?"

"Something like a word to the wise."

"Well, of course it did strike me, after the second request, that it might be some kind of coded intro. But what for, I can't think."

"If there were black Porphyry pixies available only to those who asked for them, but not on display, then it might make some kind of sense. But since you say there definitely are none —"

"Wait a minute, Mark," April interrupted. "Perhaps the fact that there are none is itself significant. Suppose, for example, that asking for a black Porphyry pixie was a coded request for something quite different... then surely the last thing they'd have in stock would be such a repellent object, if only to avoid the risk of someone, someone not in the know, asking for one by coincidence and getting told automatically whatever there was to be told."

"I say! I think you may have got something there," Slate exclaimed. "How can we check and find out if it's true? — And, if so, what the

coded request leads to?"

"First of all by giving this place a far more systematic going over than I can manage while it's supposed to be open to the public. I suggest we come here secretly tonight, with flashlights and with plenty of time, to see if we can find out what they were up to. That way, too, we can work together without giving the game away — that we know each other, I mean."

"Fine, There is one thing, though, April: you keep mentioning *them* and *they*...the last thing they would have in stock; what they were up to; and so on. Whom do you have in mind? The girl in whose kiosk all this is supposed to take place was an U.N.C.L.E. agent — one of us! Was she in on it, do you think? And if so, what on earth was she up to?"

"That's not the least of the mysteries we have to solve... Hold it again! There's someone coming — and it's the old man himself. No less!"

For a moment, Mark heard only the indeterminate background noise of the funfair — voices, laughter, the thwack of coconuts, a glare of jukebox music — as an obbligato to the mewing of gulls. The wind was rising, snatching at the body work of the car and flattening the grey-green leaves of sea pinks on the cliff. Then came the old man's voice, surly as ever: "Good day, Miss Dancer. Gettin' into the swing of it, I hope? Not that there's much around in the way of clientele in this God-forsaken hole in winter. You want to latch on to any foreigners — strangers, that is — that you see and talk them into a sale. Pretty girl like you shouldn't find that too difficult, I guess. But don't waste any time on the locals: they come to stare, not to buy... Sold anything today?"

"Only one or two, I'm afraid" — April's voice was a nicely judged blend of deference and coquetry — "but I managed to shift an Agate stud box and a couple of light houses."

"Which ones?"

"The little ones .. . these."

"You should never sell those if you can help it. If they'll buy those, they'll buy a size larger. Look through the stock until you find one or two of the little ones that are slightly flawed — then put them in the front against the best examples you can find of the more expensive ones. That way, the mugs'll see that the dearer one is worth the difference."

"Suppose they won't stretch to it, Mr. Bosustow?"

"You do your stuff and they will. But if they don't, then sell 'em one of the flawed little 'uns. Of course, *if* they insist, show 'em the better examples. Any sale's better'n none... but in any case I don't think you're going to get much practice just now! As I say, the locals just won't bite."

"They don't like any of this beautifully turned stuff?"

"Not a thing."

"Not even the pixies in black Porphyry?"

"Pixies in black Porphyry? What are you talking about, girl? That's a damfool thing to say; you can't work pixies out of that kind of material! It'd never take the detail: the crystals are too big and the whole thing's far too brittle. Even my son couldn't do that, and he's the expert. You ask him."

"I'm sorry. It was just that one or two people asked…"

"For Cornish pixies in *Porphyry*? Black Porphyry? They must have been out of their minds. A lighthouse with a gallery — or perhaps a box with a decorated lid — that's about as far as you can go with that!... Anyway, you keep trying. I'm — er — I'm in my trailer if you should want me for any reason."

"Does my womanly intuition deceive me, or was that the germ of a proposition?" April demanded when she came back on the line again.

"Hardly knowing the man, I couldn't say. But knowing you, love... well, you draw your own seamy conclusions," Mark chuckled. "At least one thing is clear, though: there are no pixies in that stone. So we need waste no time looking for them tonight."

"That's right. What we do have to do, though, is find something else — something to which a request for a Porphyry pixie might provide a lead... Look, Mark: I must go for a moment. The wind seems to be getting up and there's a side flap here that'll be out of control unless I fasten it down now. I'll be with you in a minute

While he waited, Mark Slate got out of the car and took the Communicator with him to the cliff top.

The breeze had indeed freshened appreciably, even in the short time

since he had parked. His trousers plucked at his calves as he stood on the lip of a sheer face of granite plunging two hundred and fifty feet to the sea. The water was grey now, the division between sky and ocean even less precise, and around the rocks which pierced the swell sucking at the base of the headland angry crests were already creaming into explosions of spray. To one side, geological aeons ago, a fault had sliced away half the bill, which now leaned precariously into the waves with its stepped sides a foam with sea birds.

The buffeting of the wind in his ears, and the thin shrilling of air through the vegetation at first masked the call-sign on the Communicator, and the instrument had bleeped three times before his mind registered the sound.

"Sorry!" he called, the device close up against his lips as he glanced around once more to make sure that nobody was near. "I was just verifying that there seems to be a storm blowing up, and the atmospherics drowned you out at first! Have you fixed your canvas?"

"Yes, I have. I don't know if it's the thought of warmth and light at the end of what looks like becoming a bad afternoon, but there seems to be quite a crowd drifting in now, in twos and threes. We'd better make plans for our rendezvous later, in case we don't have the chance to talk again."

"Okay," Mark said. "You're the lady. You choose."

"Right. I'll be here in the caravan he's let me have. Most of them — judging by last night — put out their lights quite early. The place closes at ten. There's an hour's television while they eat. And then that's it... Give them an hour to settle, and we can start."

"It looks like the witching hour, then?"

"Check. To make doubly sure, you leave your pub at twelve. You'll have the car in the garage there, I suppose, and come on foot?... Right. The walk should take you about ten or twelve minutes, so allowing for getting in, I guess we'd be safe to make a date at the booth for twelve-twenty. Okay?"

"Okay," Mark said. "What do you —" But he was abruptly shushed into silence as a surge of voices drew near the transmitter. After a moment, they passed on — all but one: a distinctive woman's voice, a voice curt with the certainty of command, arrogant and clipped, speaking with the nasal yet strangulated accents of Kensington. A voice, moreover, which Mark Slate instantly recognised, for it was the voice of the

woman who had contrived the meeting with him in the bar, the wife of Sir Gerald Wright.

"Oh, good afternoon," it said patronisingly. "I wonder, do you — would you possibly have such a thing as one of those little Cornish pixies in black Porphyry?"

CHAPTER SEVEN: SOMETHING THE TIDE BROUGHT IN…

A LOOSE shutter on one of the sideshow booths was banging in the wind as April Dancer slipped noiselessly from the small caravan and began to make her way across the field towards the souvenir kiosk which had been rented by Sheila Duncan.

Doors yammered, canvas flapped, ropes heaved and the hedge was tossing in the squalls which moaned in the wires stringing together the thrumming telegraph poles, and whining through every slit and gap in the circus. The girl zipped her windcheater closer to her neck and tucked her trouser legs deep into her boots. Just before she emerged from the dense shadow the twin lines of trailers cast, she paused and looked around her.

A three-quarter moon sailed occasionally into sight across rifts in the scurrying clouds, but most of the light flooding the Big Top and the carved faces of the booths came from the single street lamp positioned at the entrance to the field. The caravans themselves were all in darkness though there was no telling how many of the blank windows might hide a flattened nose or eagerly peering eye.

April listened for a moment to the drumroll of the waves clamouring to enter the harbour below, and then moved on, keeping to the shadows as far as possible. A few paces later, the street lamp whirled away and the wet grass flew up and hit her coldly on the cheek. She had tripped over a carelessly placed guy rope in the dark.

She rose to her feet and made some attempt to dust off the muddy knees of her trousers: then, without warning, a hand fell on her arm as she was about to cross the brighter space separating her from the dark line of the booths.

"Hold it a minute, lovely," Mark Slate's voice whispered urgently. "We have visitors and I have a feeling it may not be convenient to call."

"Mark! You startled me for a moment!... What are you doing here? I thought our date was at the booth."

"It was. This blasted wind pushed me up the hill faster than I had expected and I was here five minutes early — fortunately, perhaps. Because as I approached the place, having circumnavigated the bobby on duty at the gate, I noticed a momentary flash of light within. Before I could make up my mind what to do, I saw it again. Aha! thought I. 'It's burglars, is it? Very well, we shall wait until our numbers are swelled and then we shall act."

"Wait until what yelled?" April demanded over the blustering of the wind. In the sudden lull which followed her words, they heard the chimes of the town-hall clock, swaying and distorted in the turbulent air, telling the half hour.

"I said wait until our numbers are swelled," Mark said as loudly as he dared. "Wait until you showed up, in other words. Now perhaps we can try some kind of circling movement and take them from two sides at once. However hard you try, you simply can't do that all on your lonesome!"

"Of course not. You were right to wait, Mark... You didn't see anything in the brief flash of light, by any chance? I mean, it didn't last long enough for you to see inside and to catch a glimpse of what they were doing?"

"Afraid not. It was simply the suspicion of a gleam through the shutter. And then, once my interest was caught and I watched properly, I saw the same thing again — only this time it was fractionally longer and I was able to positively identify that it came from inside and wasn't some stray reflection."

"What do you make of it, then?"

"Seems to me that kind of light is made only by someone who knows the place backwards and just shows a glim to verify the position of something."

"Working practically by instinct, you mean," April said. "Yes, I agree that's what it sounds like. Come on... you know which booth it is; third from the left in the line at right angles to the children's roundabout. I'll take the door at the back; you stand by at the front in case whoever it is tries to exit over the counter and through the curtain."

They sped across the area lit by the street lamp and melted into the shadows behind the sideshows. While the girl tiptoed round to the door of the third kiosk, Slate stood guard a little to one side, at the front. A foot away from the door-handle, April paused. The wind was still whistling around the stays and guy ropes of the circus, flattening the grass which showed up in a bar of light piercing the dark through a passage separating two booths.

Before she moved, another source of light fleetingly revealed itself nearer at hand. As Mark had told her, there *was* someone inside with a flashlight: for the briefest of moments, she had seen the keyhole and the crack around the door etched against the night… then everything was dark again, by contrast even more so than before. She stretched out her hand and grasped the handle.

Afterwards, she was never able to decide exactly what it was that gave her away. Perhaps, unknown to herself, she had made some telltale noise which carried over the tumult of the wind; perhaps the intruder happened to be looking towards the door and the bulk of her body had cut off some faint illumination filtering through the keyhole; perhaps he had noticed Mark's previous arrival and had been lying in wait for them.

At all events, whatever the reason, she had scarcely touched the handle when it turned violently in her grip, the door was jerked open, and flame spat towards her three times from the muzzle of a heavy calibre revolver.

The ingrained training which had led her automatically to stand to one side as she prepared to throw open the door probably saved her life. Even so, she felt the wind of the slugs on her face as they sang past her. An instant later, almost in a reflex action, she had leaned down and inwards and — guided by the position of the flashes from the gun — had seized the burglar's wrist and pulled.

There was a flurry of movement, a grunt of surprise, and the intruder, speeded on his way by a perfect hip throw, sailed through the open doorway and crashed to the ground outside.

April whirled round and cast herself to the floor of the booth in a single movement as the gunman scrambled to his feet in the dark and loosed off two more shots into the doorway. She was herself unarmed in the conventional sense, and unless she could manoeuvre herself into a position where she would be at much closer range, there was little she could do to combat his fire power. If, as she thought, the gun

was a revolver, there must presumably still be either one or three shots left in the cylinder, according to whether there were six or eight chambers. If, on the other hand, she was mistaken and it was a heavy automatic pistol, there could be as many as seven or even ten shots to come. She decided to gamble on it being the former and try to draw her adversary's fire.

There was a faint scraping sound transmitted through the flimsy structure of the booth as Mark Slate inched his way to her rescue, his back pressed in the shadows to the outside wall.

Reaching behind her, April groped on the floor and found something hard and cold and disc-shaped — probably a Serpentine lid from one of the small stud boxes, she thought. She flipped it to the side of the doorway farthest from the scraping noise.

The flash of the explosion, drowning the small clatter of the lid on the wooden floor, seemed to her to come only inches away from her head. The intruder must have been stealing towards the door and was now only just outside.

Before the ringing in her ears had died away, there was a confusion of sounds — feet pounding, a smothered cry, a heel jarring on wood — culminating in two further shots. Simultaneously Mark shouted something unintelligible and she heard panting sounds and the noise of a struggle. As she scrambled to her feet, her nostrils tingling to the acrid stench of cordite, something heavy slammed against the wooden wall of the hut with a force that shook the small building.

A moment later the sound of running feet receded into the distance.

"April! Are you all right, April?" Mark Slate was shouting. Before the voice had died away the bulk of his body had blotted out the faint rectangle of less intense darkness which marked the doorway.

"Yes, yes, I'm all right," the girl said quickly, taking his arm. "What happened?"

"Came up the side of the hut, feinted one way to draw his fire, closed with him — and then found he was more than a match for me... Unarmed combat," Slate panted. "Threw me against the wall... got away…"

"Which way did he go?"

"Towards the gates. Do we follow?"

"Of course we do. If he's heading downhill, for the town, I've learned a shortcut that may cut down his lead a bit," April cried. "Come on!"

From the booth, they raced out of the shadows and into the patch of light thrown by the street lamp, skirted the round about, and plunged into an alley of blackness between the Big Top and the caravans. Several of the trailers now had lights in their windows and in one of them a querulous voice, its owner obviously awakened by the shots, was raised in protest. In the other direction, a bobbing flashlight advancing from the gates charted the lumbering progress of the policeman who had been left on night duty. He must have seen them flit across the pool of light, for above the clamour of the wind they heard him call out to them to stop, and the torch altered course m their favour.

"Never mind about him," April panted. "Here, between these two tents and across the car park."

They pelted down between the rows of bulging fenders and tarnished chrome, to reach a wire fence which proved to be on top of a bank. Fifteen feet below them, the road curved around the end of the property and plunged on down towards the town.

Closely followed by Slate, April sprinted up to the fence, placed a hand on one of the concrete posts, and vaulted over. After a headlong rush down the bank, they pulled up in the middle of the road and listened. "If he did come this way, he should still be in earshot," the girl whispered. "If not — if he went on up hill towards the Falmouth road — we might as well give up and go home. . .

The wind was now blowing strongly and steadily into their faces. From below, reverberated the incessant booming of the waves. Above and behind them voices were shouting. To one side, something on a hinge creaked and swung as the breeze freshened then subsided.

And ahead, faint but unmistakable, there was the sound of running feet.

Without another word, they set off in pursuit. The road angled down between rows of thatched cottages, turned to burrow under a bridge that had once carried the railway to Porthallow, and slanted more steeply still past a line of shops whose stepped pavement was protected by an iron railing.

The dark patches which lay between the pools of light cast by the widely-spaced street lamps were not so shadowy that they could hide

a human being, and they could see the street stretching emptily ahead all the way down to the central square with its bandstand. Yet the pounding of their quarry's feet was still clearly audible.

"I know!" Mark exclaimed. "There's an alley that runs parallel with this street. He must have cut through between two of the cottages and taken that. Come on!"

As they ran, the moon rode out from behind a cloud and the sea appeared improbably above the roofs in silver-grey. At the foot of the hill, a figure detached itself from the shadows, streaked across the square and disappeared behind the band stand. "There he is!" the girl called. "After him!"

By the bandstand, they pulled up and listened again. For a moment, they could only hear the wind and the sea, much louder now, and then again the sound of hurrying footsteps echoed into the night.

But which way had he gone? To their left, Fore Street stretched emptily towards the harbour, awash with yellow sodium light. Ahead was the evergreen foliage of the ornamental gardens, tossing in the breeze, with the bulk of the lifeboat station flattened into a cardboard cut-out by the moon. And on the right was Market Street, curving back up the opposite side of the valley.

Before they could make up their minds, the footsteps abruptly ceased.

"The beach, of course!" Mark cried. "He's gone down to the cove!... Look, if we can hear him, he can obviously hear us. Okay?... Right. Well, he'll realise we must be following him by ear rather than by sight, so what's he going to do? He's going to make sure he goes somewhere where his footsteps won't sound, isn't he?"

"I guess you're right at that, bright boy. And what better for deadening footsteps than a nice stretch of sand!"

"Exactly."

"How do we go, then? Which street did he take?"

"Not a street proper. Another of these alleys the amateur photographers find so enchanting. It twists down behind the Customs House and ends in a flight of steps leading to the bathing beach. There's also a way through to the harbour — past the pub I'm staying at."

"Okay," the girl said. "We'll give it a tumble. Once again: let's go."

They ran across the deserted square and into a dark passage cleaving a huddle of ancient houses. Parked cars choked the first hundred yards on one side, and then the thoroughfare became too narrow for wheeled traffic. Soon, they clattered on to a small space behind the Customs and Excise building and there was only a stone wall between them and the sea.

Mark ran to the steps leading down to the beach and halted. The wind snatched at his hair and he had to shout to make himself heard over the roar of the waves. "He forgot that even though you can't *hear* footsteps in the sand, you can *see* them!" he cried. "Look!"

It was low tide, and the sand stretched, virgin and untrodden, to the line of breakers creaming against the cliff on the far side of the cove.

"Unless he's taken a dive and intends to swim for the Channel Islands, then, it's got to be the harbour," April said. "Watch out when we go down, though. He's probably reloaded and he may be lurking behind a boat, waiting to take a shot at us. We'd be sitting targets from below, silhouetted against this sky with the moon out, wouldn't we?"

Thirty years ago, there had been three dozen fishing boats in Porthallow harbour. Small coasters could tie up against the original jetty and a packet had plied between Falmouth, Porthallow, Penzance and the Scillies. Today, only five fishing boats remain and the harbour is too shallow even for the smallest coasting steamer. The rivers, foul with industrial pollution, which have driven away the fish from their inshore breeding grounds and robbed the fishermen of their traditional livelihood, have also silted up the cove. And now, despite Smiley's Pier, the second arm enclosing the tiny port built in 1938, the whole harbour is drained and empty at low tide.

There was a lacework of foam rolling to a halt between the two stone piers marking the entrance as April and Slate, seizing their opportunity while the moon was behind a cloud, scrambled down the steps opposite the Crabber's Delight. But the whole of the rest of the port was firm, dry sand, shelving gently down towards the one shallow channel of water which remained in the lee of the main breakwater.

From the foot of the stairway, they could make out a single line of footprints zigzagging away between the stranded hulls of yachts lying on their sides like beached porpoises.

Taking advantage of every scrap of shadow, they dodged from boat to boat, picking their way over hawsers and drooping anchor chains hung with seaweed, skirting the buoys which marked the moorings rented by the amateur sailors who were now the port's chief source of revenue, pausing by the dinghies the receding tide had left pointing in every direction. Down here, below the sheltering walls, the wind was only a whine in rigging slanted against the sky somewhere above their heads, and the sound of waves was a distant roar from the world out side. There was a moisture in the air and a pungent and fishy smell on every side.

Mark Slate caught April by the arm when they had crossed rather more than two-thirds of the harbour. "The moon's going to slide out again in a moment," he murmured. "Let's just scan the terrain before we go on— just in case."

As the undulating sand was slowly flooded with pale light, they saw that the line of footprints they were following had taken on a sharper definition between the black shadows of boats. They circled a depression still full of sea water, crossed a sandbank and disappeared into a black chasm between two blue fishing boats propped against the jetty on the far side.

There was no sign of movement and no sound above the distant noises of wind and surf.

"We'll have to chance it," Slate muttered. "Keep apart from me and swerve as you run, in case our gentleman friend is between those boats with his gun at the ready."

"I did the defensive techniques course, too," the girl reminded him with a smile. "Which brings me to another point: do we know it is a gentleman?"

"If you'd been slammed against that booth as I was," the agent said ruefully, "you wouldn't give it a second thought! No woman could have done that, not even an Amazon — it wasn't judo or karate, but sheer, brute strength."

They looked at each other in the moonlight and April nodded. Together, they sprinted for the shadows beneath the far wall.

But no flames lanced the dark; no explosion thundered from the salty blackness shrouding the space between the fishing boats with their high stern cabins. Evidently, their adversary wasn't waiting to dispute the day: he was pressing on.

On the wet sand under the bulging sides of the boats, the footprints ceased. Mark tutted in exasperation. "Blast!" he said irritably. "He could have gone anywhere now. Either doubled round behind the hulls of these trawlers, climbed the wall, or even gone to earth in one of the boats. A number of people — and not only fishermen — do live on them."

April shook her head. Mutely, she pointed at the great squares of masonry which formed the jetty. At the top, where the moonlight silvered the stones above the shadows of the boats, a rope ladder with wooden rungs was draped over the edge. It was still swinging slowly from side to side.

Mark swarmed up and stood on the jetty listening, his head on one side. After a moment, he shrugged and called down:

"Not a sight nor a sound of him. I can't hear anything up here but wind and waves. There's a network of little streets on the far side of the wall here, just beyond the fish market. He could be in any of them, waiting. Or he could have got away altogether. I'm afraid we'll have to give it up; we're just that little too late..."

Slowly, he climbed down again and the two of them began to walk back across the ridged sand. When they reached the trough of sea water which remained in the lee of the other pier, there was a soft swirling noise and a wavelet curled past them up the channel, to spend itself by the steps leading back to the inn.

"Tide's turned," Slate commented as a second small surge of water swept past them. "Look at the gap between the piers. The foam's just that little bit higher than it was a few minutes ago, see! In a quarter of an hour, another channel will creep round behind those dinghies there and join this one by the steps, making this sandbank we're on into an island. In a half hour, the whole floor of the harbour will be covered."

"We'd better get out quick, then," the girl said. "I don't particularly want these boots full of water! How deep is the water in the harbour at high tide?"

"Between fifteen and eighteen feet, I believe, according to the season. But don't worry, we're all right for a few minutes."

"Mark!" There was a sudden urgency in April's voice. "Look! There!"

The agent turned and stared in the direction of her pointing finger. "What is it?" he asked. "Where? I don't see any thing."

Another swirl of water, more copious than the first two, rippled past them. A wavelet broke over his shoe and sank slowly into the sand.

"In the channel... No, nearer. There! Just where the waves are breaking by the entrance. Don't you see?"

And then suddenly he did see. As each wave broke outside the harbour, rolled in between the piers and sent a further swirl of water up the channel, it nudged something floating on the surface a little nearer the wall. Something large and black and heavy. Something that rolled sluggishly in the shallow water every time a new wavelet moved it nearer...

Before they realised it, they were running along the edge of the channel towards the gap. When they had almost reached the thing, Mark dashed ahead and waded out into the channel to get hold of it.

A higher wave creamed into the harbour, a second crest hissing on its back, to break just short of Slate and soak him to the waist. The channel was now appreciably wider.

"Look out, Mark! " April called. "You'll be bowled over."

"It's... all right," he panted. "It's a nuisance getting wet, but it helped me... get this... to the edge." His breath labouring with exertion, he splashed back to the side of the channel and hauled the floating object up on to the sand. "You were right," he said grimly. "There's something about the way they lie, isn't there? You can always tell..." Bending down, he rolled the flotsam over.

Above the waterlogged black jersey and trousers, the puffed and livid face of Ephraim Busustow's eldest son turned limply up and stared sightlessly at the moon.

CHAPTER EIGHT: "ALL THE BEST LIGHTHOUSES ARE HOLLOW!"

"His hands were still tied together behind his back when we found him," Mark Slate told April the next afternoon. "And Curnow is fairly convinced that his ankles and knees had been tied when he was actually killed — though, of course, he'll have to wait until the pathologist's report for confirmation."

"Then it's definitely murder, as we thought," the girl said. "And I suppose that rules out whoever it was that we were chasing. He could hardly have been pilfering my kiosk and killing that man at the same time!"

"Not at the same time — but the fact that it's murder doesn't rule him out, according to Curnow. The police surgeon thinks he was killed quite a long time before the tide brought him to our notice."

"He wag drowned, though?"

"Oh, yes. No doubt about that. In a particular nasty fashion, my superintendent believes — he said that, from the marks and bruises they had found on the body, and from certain discolorations which occur after a drowning, he thought the poor chap had been hog-tied, hand and foot, and then held up by his ankles with his head and shoulders below the surface of the water. As you know, no amount of struggling overcomes that."

"How dreadful, Mark. Out at sea, I suppose?"

"Yes. They think he was probably lured aboard a boat on some pretext, overpowered when they were well out to sea, and then killed. If they'd fed him, bound, over the edge of a small boat head first, and then just held his ankles at the level of the gunwale, it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to drown him."

"It seems somewhat elaborate," she commented.

"Oh, I don't think there was any doubt that they had meant to make it appear like accident or suicide. He hadn't been hit on the head or drugged or anything — that's why they think he was lured aboard; either that or he knew and had no reason to suspect his killers... Whoever was holding the feet would simply have taken out a knife and sawn through the ankles bonds as soon as the struggles ceased, and then cut the ropes around the knees, and finally leaned over to sever the binding at the wrists — only it was further to lean, it was rough as you'll recall, and he muffed it."

"Is this just deduction, or is there —?"

"There's some evidence to prove it," Slate interrupted with a smile. "Curnow told me the rope around the wrists was half sawn through. The killer — or killers — must have been in too much of a hurry, that's all."

"And then they intended the tide to bring him ashore again in its own good time — minus bonds or marks of violence — to give the coroner another 'Accident' verdict."

"Exactly. Curnow inclines to the view that the murderers are what he calls foreigners. He says a local man would have known that, at this time of the year, the incoming tide would have brought him straight back on the next high. There's quite a rip, apparently, out beyond the headland there... and if they didn't mean the sea to keep him undiscovered for some appreciable time, then there would have been no point at all in going through the whole boat routine."

"Yes, that makes sense." April said slowly. "But I wonder why? What had the poor little man done?"

"He was an offensive and objectionable man — rather large, as a matter of fact."

"You and your *fact*! It's *reasons* that count, not facts. No, I mean I wonder if he was tied up with *our* killing, or whether it's just coincidence. I guess a second time makes a personal murder even less likely..."

They were sitting on a bench in the sideshow booth that had been Sheila Duncan's, trying to fit together the pieces of their particular jigsaw. Mark had spent the morning exploiting his newly-won friendship with Superintendent Curnow — and since they had both discovered the body, and had both had to make statements at the police station, it had seemed absurd to proceed any longer with the fiction that they did not know each other.

Accordingly, while they went over the affair in their minds, they had been investigating the booth's stock again, to see whether they might find some clue to what it was the mysterious burglar wanted.

"It has to be important," April said for the third time. "Otherwise people wouldn't be prepared to kill for it. It has to have an obvious and incriminating connection with Sheila's death. And at the same time, it must obviously be difficult to locate — otherwise three separate burglaries, all of them so far as we know unsuccessful, would not have been necessary."

"Do you think he'll try again?" Slate asked.

"I don't see how he could... not with the risk there'd be."

"So for once we're in a good position to get a move ahead of the game, as it were."

"We're in a good position to try. Oh — and I forgot one other factor in my list of things our unidentified object has to satisfy. It must be something to which a request for a black Porphyry pixie, a non-existent pixie, can be a lead!"

Mark ran his fingers through his short hair. "And it's all here, ladies and gentlemen," he said oracularly. "All the stock the lady possessed laid out in neat and orderly rows on counter and chair and desk and drawer and floor for your distinguished inspection! Walk up, walk up, and take a look! Take your pick — take your shovel, if you so wish — and examine carefully every single one. These are the clues — all you have to do is to interpret them to win a big money prize!"

"And not a Porphyry pixie amongst them!" the girl said sepulchrally. "Either in black or in any other — Hey! Wait a minute, though... There are no Porphyry pixies, but there are a few Porphyry lighthouses. Black ones, too! Look, at the back there, behind the ashtrays you stood on that drawer. Where did you find that little haul, by the way? I didn't put it there."

"The ashtrays were in a cardboard box that the dustbin was standing on. I think they must just have been delivered, all the same: they were still wrapped in tissue... The lighthouses — they're only about three inches high, as you see — the light houses were inside those tall white mugs standing on the shelf above the sink there. Come to think of it, that's an odd place to put stock when you still have shelf room to spare, and…"

His voice tailed away. They looked at each other.

The girl moved first. Snatching up one of the miniature stone models, she began turning it over and over in her hands. "That's all there were?" she asked absently. "Just the seven?"

"That's all I've found," Slate said. He picked up one of the black lighthouses himself and examined it. "I've never really looked at them before," he went on. "I know they turn them up on a lathe and then polish them with a carborundum wheel, and I suppose they have something like a potter's wheel for the round boxes and ashtrays.

"I was just thinking," the agent said slowly. "Lighthouses are peculiarly suitable for shaping on a lathe: from whichever point of the compass you look at them, the shape of the elevation is always the same. And

the plan is simply a decreasing or increasing circle."

"So?"

"So you'd expect to find, at the top and bottom, a tiny mark, a trace of the hole into which the spindle of the lathe fitted, even if it had been subsequently filled up — Look, you can see it on these Serpentine ones, the big and the small... Here and here... and here, too. But not a sign on the black ones."

"And that implies?"

"I should say it meant that these particular lighthouses had been made in two separate sections and then screwed together. The parts where the lathe spindle had fitted would be hidden within the join, then."

"You're right! Yes, you're' right," April said excitedly. "You can see the join where the wide curve of the base flattens out to make the main tower of the lighthouse. And I think... yes... I think it will be quite... easy... Ah! There we are!... to unscrew!" She held up the two halves of the stone souvenir.

There was a shallow depression in the base, threaded to take the complementary extension projecting from the top half.

But the projection from the top half was itself hollow: inside the threaded collar, a recess two inches deep and about the diameter of a fountain pen was tunnelled up into the shaft of the lighthouse.

"It's hollow! They're all hollow," the girl exclaimed as they unscrewed the remaining half dozen.

"All the best lighthouses are hollow," Slate said severely. "It makes it so much easier for the crew to reach the lantern gallery... The point is: what's in the hollow? In the case of real lighthouses, four or five storeys of accommodation and stores; in the case of these Porphyry monstrosities... we must see."

But the promising "secret" compartments in the stone light houses were all empty. Or at least they appeared to be at first.

A closer examination, however, revealed that this was not precisely true.

For while six of the recesses were indeed bone dry, clean and empty, the seventh cascaded a small quantity of white, crystalline powder on

to Slate's hand when he tapped the side of the shaft with his finger…

CHAPTER NINE: OBSTRUCTIONS AND INTRUSIONS!

THE police constable on duty outside the gates leading to the field in which Bosustow's Circus was wintering prised a handkerchief from the blue serge sleeve of his jacket, extruded it through the slit in his shining cape and blew his nose.

It was almost midnight, it was raining cats and dogs, it was more than six hours before his relief arrived, and he had had a row with his wife and stormed from the house without his dinner. Between eight and ten, he had been drinking at the Crabber — and now he had a raging headache as well as the beginning of a cold. He thought wistfully of the hot Cornish pasties going to waste in Molly's oven, the uncut apple pie, the scalding coffee and the clots of buttery cream spiralling on the dark surface of the liquid. He was very unhappy.

The rain drummed on the dome of his helmet, slid in glittering cascades down the rubber cape, and drenched the lower half of his trouser legs. Angrily, he stamped up and down, trying to pound some warmth into the sodden soles of his socks.

For two pins, he thought, he'd nip on up the road a bit and sit down in the bus shelter at the Falmouth signpost. But you had to be careful. Only last night, Watkins had copped it properly from the Super when some villains had got into the field and started shooting at each other — or so they said: no one seemed to know what had really happened, least of all poor Watkins! He had hoped that, what with those two foreigners finding the body in the harbour, it might all have been forgotten — after all, nothing had been taken, nobody was hurt, and apparently no one at the circus itself was involved. But Sergeant Trelawnay had been really difficult about the thing and had compared Watkins floundering about with his torch to a man lost in a fog made by his own pipe. That, of course, was probably because the Sergeant still had a sore head from his daughter's wedding the day before. They did say he had consumed a prodigious quantity of drink.

Even so, he had still been fairly narked this afternoon when he had detailed the constable for tonight's late trick. "You let anyone through that gate or over that fence tonight, Trewithick," he said, "and I'll have your liver for breakfast!"

It was a sad thing, having men of low sensitivity for superiors, the constable reflected. Still — it wasn't worth the risk. If he did go to the shelter for a sit-down and a smoke, old Curnow just might drive past in one of the Wolseleys; somebody just might get into the field and kick up some kind of a shindig; Trelawnay just might take it into his great head to do the rounds on a bicycle, despite the rain... and if he was found to be away from his post with murders and burglaries all over Porthallow... Constable Trewithick shivered under his cape at the thought of the action which would inevitably follow such a discovery!

He reached the end of his self-imposed beat, from the elm tree below the gate to the shuttered ticket office beyond it, stamped his feet again, swung round, and moved ponderously back towards the tree. If only it had been summer, now, he thought with a disgruntled frown, then there would have been leaves on the tree and he could have simply stood there, sheltering from this dratted rain. As it was, all the bare branches did was to increase the size of the drops which fell on him.

Turning, he trudged back again, idly remarking the reflection in the window of the office of the metal numerals sewn to the collar of his uniform. The seven and the three, dulled by the humidity and beaded with rain, still shone well in the lamplight, he thought, regarding their reversed images with a glow of pride in the handiness of his wife.

Then he remembered — and as his large face creased once more into a scowl, he saw something else reflected in the glass. Somebody was walking up the road towards him.

It was a girl, he saw as he turned to face the newcomer. A pretty girl, too, in her trousers and her boots and her shining black raincoat, with the rain misting her hair and lying in large drops on the soft skin of her face. He gazed approvingly at her as she approached the gates.

"Good evening, Sergeant," she said pleasantly, smiling. "I'm a little late tonight, I'm afraid, but I imagine you'll let me in all right, won't you?" She gave a low musical laugh, completely confident.

And then he remembered her. Of course — it was the new girl! The one who had taken over the sideshow run by the bird who got herself knocked off. Foreigner, she was — a real foreigner, too, he had heard. South African or Australian or American or something like that. Very pretty, though, for all that.

"Evening, Miss," he said. "It's Constable, actually. Constable

Trewithick. Of course you can go in... Seeing as you live here, as it were, it'd be a bit of a liberty on my part to try and stop you, wouldn't it?" He chuckled in his turn, moving towards the big gate.

"Oh, well," the girl said. "If all the local police were as charming as you are, I'm sure there'd be nothing but sergeants in the Force!"

"Very kind of you, Miss, I'm sure," the policeman said, swinging the gate wide for her. Was that a blur of movement he had seen by the hedge, a bit farther down the hill there? Or was it simply a drift of rain blowing across the road in the lamplight?... Oh, well: he'd look in a minute. The girl was speaking again.

"I really do sympathize — having to stay out on a night like this just so that people like me can sleep safely in our beds," she said. "I'm sure you will be a sergeant very soon. Then you can tell other policemen to do this kind of job, can't you?" She smiled once more.

"Yes, Miss," P.C. Trewithick said. "Thank you kindly."

"Look," the girl said. "Why don't you come in yourself for a moment? Let me make you a hot drink — a cup of coffee or something. You must be perished out here all night. Do."

Trewithick was scandalized. "Oh, no, Miss, thank you," he said. "That would never do. A married man like me alone in a caravan late at night with (you'll excuse me?) a beautiful young lady! Oh, dear me no. Besides — I'm not allowed to leave my post. That's what I'm here for: to see nobody gets in as shouldn't. Thank you kindly just the same, though."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "Who cares what people think!" she said. "But if you're not allowed to, that's a different matter. I'd hate to be accused of contributing to the dereliction of an officer's duty, or whatever it is!... You will give me a call, won't you, nevertheless — if you change your mind about that drink, I mean. I can always bring it out to you, you know."

The policeman smiled. "Very nice of you," he said. "But I think I'd just better stay here, all the same. It's pretty late, after all."

"All right, then. Just as you like. Good night, officer."

The girl walked through the open gate, waved, and hurried along between the sideshows towards the caravans. At the end of the aisle, she turned right by the roundabout and disappeared. That was odd,

the constable thought. He could have sworn the murdered girl's caravan was to the left. Oh, well — never mind. Perhaps old Bosustow had given this one a different trailer... Now there was that matter of the movement he thought he had seen farther down the hill. He flashed his torch along the dripping hedge, letting its beam probe the long grasses on the bank and lance on towards the cottages beyond.

No. He had been mistaken, after all. Nothing moved in the dark patch between the lamps. There was only the rain, slanting ceaselessly down from the overcast sky. He must have seen from the corner of his eye a particularly heavy drift blowing into the pool of light cast by the lamp. The wind had dropped all the same — that was one consolation! He shrugged deeper into the clammy cape and walked back up the hill towards the office. Somewhere among the lights winking up from the valley, the town clock chimed midnight.

"Twelve o'clock!" April Dancer exclaimed in the dense shadow behind the Big Top. "I guess it's safe to move now. We'd better start: there's a lot to do tonight."

"You are absolutely sure about the bobby, are you?" Mark Slate asked in a whisper. "I thought he glanced my way just as I was nipping over the hedge back there."

"Don't *worry*," the girl reassured him. "I tell you he was far too busy being flattered and struggling to play the unaccustomed role of the gallant himself. He was sweet. Those big fatherly ones are always a piece of cake."

"Okay, then. We're on our way… Forgive me for being obtuse, April — but I'm afraid I still can't quite see why we're on our way, just the same. On this particular deal, I mean. What good is it going to do us?"

She laid a hand on his arm. "Look, Mark," she said; "we're floating around in a bit of a mess, aren't we, not knowing what's a police job, what's our job, and who's involved in which?"

"Too true."

"All we know is that everybody seems to be involved in *something*. And the easiest way to sort out our own pigeons from those of the police — if indeed there is any difference — is to find out for ourselves precisely what everybody really is up to."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, we happen to have a big advantage over the police here. They have to have a warrant before they search anything. And they have to have a good reason before they get a warrant. Because we work undercover, we can get in without a warrant—"

"Illegally."

"— illegally, as you say. But it's a much quicker way of finding things out, I think you'll agree!"

"Oh, the point is taken," Slate said carelessly, "and all the principles accepted. It's just that I don't see this particular one, as I say."

"The Bosustows, you mean?"

Slate nodded.

"Because they are obstructing the police, for one thing. According to your friend Curnow, the old man practically tries to stop them coming in every time they want to ask a question, doesn't he?"

"That's true; he does. I've seen him being pretty unpleasant to Curnow myself."

"And he never gives a straight answer, never volunteers anything, and only talks at all if it's dragged from him?"

Again the agent murmured an affirmative.

"Well, why?" April demanded. "You'd think he'd be only too glad to have the thing cleared up as speedily as possible. After all, she was murdered on his property, while she was working for him — and it can't be all that good for business having a permanent boy in blue at the gate, I imagine!"

"True again. And I suppose the same thing goes for your other bird?"

"The son? Certainly... We've got to find out what they're up to — and if it's connected with us in any way. At the moment we have a minor agent killed, possibly in the course of duty, possibly not; we have the possibility that she had discovered something going on at the DEWS station behind the town; we have the possibility that she was part of a jealous triangle — the other two members being the local squire and a stone worker. In the cast also are suspicious families, intruders in the night, people who roll rocks on cars, and at least one — possibly two — murderers. To say nothing of complaisant wives striking up

acquaintances with us and then joining a queue of boys seeking to buy a non-existent pixie!"

"To all of which must be added another possibility," said Mark. "That the said queue was in some way connected with a dope ring. It certainly looks as though asking for a black Porphyry pixie was, as you thought, a code. And the lucky winner was handed, not a pixie, but a black Porphyry light house — a secret compartment in which was filled with a mysterious white powder."

"Well, there you are!" the girl said triumphantly. "There may be more than one mystery to solve here, and the sooner we start our process of elimination, the better... You did send the powder to an analyst, by the way?"

"Yes. I had to send it to a firm in Truro. There didn't seem anyone suitable nearer. These people work for some of the big private investigation agencies and they're on the books of London HQ as being okay. I put it on the train at Helston just before lunch."

"Good… Look, here's the hut the old man uses as a kind of general office. I saw the wife of the brother who was murdered staggering in here laden with books today — the big, brassy one, isn't it? — and if, as you say, she's the one who keeps the accounts, then we should be able to find out something or other about something in here!"

Mark Slate drew a rectangular bakelite box from the pocket of his raincoat, moistened the four tiny suction cups at the corners, and clamped it firmly to the door of the hut over the lock — which was surprisingly robust for so flimsy a structure. He crouched down, switched on the pencil beam of a fountain-pen torch for the briefest of moments, and manipulated a pair of knobs with milled edges. A few seconds later, there was a distinctive, heavy click above the pelting of the rain. He stood up. "That's that one," he said. "There's only the ordinary mortice now — I think I'll borrow your twirls, if you have 'em on you, lovey."

April handed him a bunch of skeleton keys. After the third attempt, he gave a grunt of satisfaction and twisted the handle. The door swung inwards.

The hut smelled of linseed oil and old books. It was stuffy and airless and the rain drummed exasperatingly on the asphalt roof. In the thin ray of light from the torch, they saw that it was furnished only with a scarred table, a swivelling office chair with the stuffing showing

through a hole in the seat, a poorly made shelf full of reference books, and three steel filing cabinets, all of which were locked.

"Oh, well — here we go again," Slate murmured, taking the bakelite device from his pocket once more. "Thank goodness this electronic monster leaves this kind of lock so that it automatically springs shut again when you close the drawer! There's nothing I hate more than going round un-picking locks that I've just opened, when I leave a place."

Each of the cabinets had four drawers, and most of them — Mark saw as soon as he had opened them successfully — were full of files dealing with the normal day-to-day affairs of the circus: invoices, bills and receipts for goods purchased; cancelled cheques; wages slips; details of employment; insurance papers; Pay-As-You-Earn documents, and so on. One drawer, however — the bottom one in the cabinet furthest from the door — seemed to interest him especially. After a glance at the ledger nearest the front, he pulled out all the files and books inside and carried them over to the table.

"Found something?" April asked. "You're the one with the diploma in bookkeeping. So if you have, you're on your own, mate!"

"Books of the circus," he explained absently, subsiding into the old chair and shading the tiny flashlight with one cupped hand. "The kind that get audited and shown to Her Majesty's Inspector of Taxes... if you're unlucky. And there seem to be two sets, what's more. The plot, as they say, thickens."

For some time, he worked in silence, opening ledgers and running a finger down columns of figures, rifling through pages in another book and comparing them with the entries there, jotting down an occasional note on a scrap of paper he had taken from his own pocket. April sat on the window ledge and watched the shaded beam of the light race up and down the ruled pages. From time to time, her companion gave a grunt — though whether it was of astonishment or of satisfaction she couldn't tell. Once he gave a low, long whistle — and once he erupted into a short bark of laughter, instantly stifled. Finally he shut the last book with a snap, leaned back in the creaking chair, swivelled himself round to face her and stretched his arms above his head.

"Well, double-entry bookkeeping does have its advantages," he said; "especially when there are two different sets of books as well! But I've never seen anything quite like this before. Either the woman's mad, or

she's a near-genius!"

"The books are cooked?" she asked.

"Not so much cooked as incinerated. There's absolutely no relation between the two sets. The ones they show to the auditors and to the tax people show a profit margin so slender that it's only just worth while their going on; the books presenting the real situation show that in fact they're rolling in money. All summer, while they're touring, the loot pours in; and even here in winter, mainly due to low overheads and few staff, they make a healthy little profit!"

"No wonder the old man is always bleating about the lack of trade here in the winter! If he's told me once that nobody spends in Porthallow, he's told me a dozen times!... The two sets of books are quite different, you say?"

"Entirely. And yet, you see — if anyone made a spot check, there are certain sets of figures common to both, certain correspondences... It's quite brilliant: anyone with only the 'official' set, plus the genuine invoices and receipts and so on, would almost certainly pass them. I'd defy anyone to spot it first time — anyone who wasn't already suspicious, that is." He shook his head in reluctant admiration of the brassy Mrs. Bosustow.

"Right," April said crisply, sliding from her perch to the ground. "So we know the old boy and his family had good reason to object to busybodies prying about in the circus, especially police busybodies: they were cheating the income tax authorities in a big way. I guess that lets the old boy out of our net."

"Yes. It seems reason enough both for his surliness and his obstructiveness. What about the murdered son, though?"

April hesitated. "I still think we should have a look around," she said at last. "I know he was a member of the family and this crookery covers him too. But in my view he qualifies for separate treatment on two counts: as the brother of a murder suspect; and as a murder victim himself — whether or not the two are connected."

"Okay, then. We'll go," Mark agreed. "You're sure her caravan's empty?"

"Certain. The widow — your financier of near-genius — is spending a few nights with her sister-in-law. I helped her take over some of her stuff this afternoon. The caravan's at the other end of the—"

"Yes, I've been there, if it's the equestrienne," Mark interrupted. "Her own caravan, the late Harry's that is, is the converted furniture lorry, isn't it?"

"You could call it that — though I imagine the owner would hardly be flattered. The important thing about it, to us, is that there are shutters and curtains on the windows, so that we shan't have to be quite so careful about lights as we have been here."

"Who's next door?"

"By a strange coincidence, I am... on one side. The other side is just trees beyond a fence: the caravan's the end of the line on the side away from the road."

"What, then," Mark said, "are we waiting for?" He replaced the books, slid shut the filing drawers, turned the chair back to face the desk, and held open the door for April.

Ten minutes later, securely shuttered against the outer world, they were sitting at the table where Mark had seen Harry Bosustow going through his candid-camera negatives. The bow legged accountant who wore too much makeup had removed all her ledgers to the hut they had just left, Bosustow's own effects had obviously been removed by the police in the hope that they might yield a clue to his killer, and his wife clearly believed in tidying everything away before she went to stay with friends. In all the glittering array of highly polished veneer cupboards and drawers and shelves, there was neither a personal belonging nor a book nor a picture to be seen.

"Well, I've heard of austere living quarters," Mark said, "but this is ridiculous! Come on: we simply have to something..."

Together, they ransacked the place. They inspected the china and utensils in the immaculate kitchen; they investigated wardrobes; they turned over the neatly ranged contents of drawers. And there was nothing, nothing remotely suspicious, incriminating or even interesting. The private life of the late Harry Bosustow seemed to have been as sterile as his home.

"But, good God, there must be *something*," Mark exploded at last. "I mean, the chap must have at least had a picture of his nephew or... Hey! That's odd! Now that I come to think of it, where *are* his photos?"

"What photos?"

"The ones he made his living from. The candid-camera stuff on the seafront and in the circus. Ma getting into a fishing boat to go out after mackerel; Pa having a go at the coconuts. There has to be a detailed filing system for those, with lists of names and addresses to match up with those on the counterfoils of the tickets the photographer gives the mugs after he's taken them. Plus descriptions, plus notes of money received and prints despatched. It's quite a performance — and it takes up a reasonable space."

They went over the place again, more eagerly now that they had something definite to look for, and April soon found the cache in which all Harry Bosustow's photographic equipment was kept. Neatly stacked in docketed compartments and drawers and detachable trays, it lay in three lockers fitted beneath the bunk bed, hidden by the folds of a counterpane.

"They must have had an efficiency expert to design this lot," Mark said as they lifted the equipment out and examined it. "Look how exactly everything fits. See, this slides just so far, and you can take out that — but it doesn't go far enough to impede the opening of this lid. Marvellous!"

There were three cameras — a Rolleiflex, a Hasselblad and a Leica — several trays full of hoods and attachments and special lenses, a multiplicity of other gadgets and, in another locker, a series of shallow tanks and other dark-room apparatus, including a miniature enlarger. The third drawer was entirely filled with small packets of negatives, all labelled, and a series of notebooks relating to them.

"There certainly seems to be enough there," April observed when they had laid all this out on the table and examined it. "And it looks innocuous enough"

"I was just thinking, on the contrary, how very little there is," Slate replied. "So far as the library of negatives goes, I mean. These chaps have to handle a big turnover to make it worthwhile, you see. And they usually keep them for some while in case of reorders. You know what people are about holiday snaps!... Most of the wide boys use Polaroid cameras now, of course. They click the machine as you go past and then hold out one hand... and you, thinking a picture has been taken and you're being given the ticket, foolishly stop. Then they have you. They back you up, take a genuine photo, whip it out of the camera and give it to you — and there you are, stuck with the price! Our Harry seems to have favoured the older system, though."

"You mean where they really do take you as you walk along and you can see the contact prints in the photographer's window the next day, and order enlargements from the ticket they handed you, if you want?"

"That's it. Thus the paperwork — which the Polaroid boys avoid altogether, since their cameras develop and print automatically within a few seconds. I wonder why Harry B. should still..." He broke off and rifled through the closely packed rows of envelopes. "Let's just have a look at the sort of thing he was doing," he said, switching on his pocket torch again.

Picking envelopes at random from all over the locker, he began glancing at the negatives they contained and then looking up the numbers in one of the books. After he had done three or four, he stiffened and bent forward with more concentration. "That's funny..." he murmured, relapsing into silence once more as he pulled still more packets from the file. And finally he turned to April, who had been waiting patiently all this time, and gesturing to the table top, where he had ranged the envelopes of negatives in two piles. Beside them were two notebooks. "What do you make of those? "he said.

The girl took the flashlight and began looking through the negatives. The first pile were all 2.5" x 2.25", presumably taken either by the Hasselblad or the Rolleiflex. They showed a man walking along with a children's bucket and spade, a group of three giggling teenagers, several couples sheepishly smiling, and a three-generation family group on the quayside. The numbers on all of them corresponded with ordinary-sounding names and addresses in London, in the Midlands and in the North, all entered in one of the notebooks.

All the second group were 35mm negatives from the Leica. In subject matter they were subtly different. They, too, were mostly couples — but whereas the first group were all exteriors, with people obviously aware that they were being photographed, the people in the second group looked for the most part too absorbed in each other to notice the camera. And some of them were in unexpected surroundings. Two showed couples sitting over drinks on what looked like a hotel terrace; one was a telephoto lens shot of a man and a girl on a beach; another showed a military-looking man in a swimsuit holding hands with a lifeguard; the fifth, a picture taken by flash, was of a man and a woman sitting, with astonished expressions, in the back of a car. At the sixth, April paused: "But surely that's the landlord of the pub you're staying in! "she said.

"Yes it is. But the girl in the bikini with him is not Mrs. Walker. Have you checked the second series against the other notebook? "

"Not yet. I'll… Oh. They seem all to be in some sort of code."

"They are. Probably names and addresses too — with a bit of time-and-place thrown in. And perhaps an amount."

The girl looked up. "Blackmail?" she said softly.

"That's the way it looks, doesn't it? There are two separate series of photos here. The conventional seaside snapshot ones, complete with names and addresses; just enough to make a convincing cover, but not enough to make a living, I can assure you. And the second series — all of couples, and, I surmise, all of couples who ought not to be together. You know — the wrong man with the wrong wife at the wrong time. That couple so innocently sitting on the terrace, for example: he's probably supposed to be on a business trip to Glasgow, and there he is with a strange woman at the seaside. You'll notice that most of them have a calendar in shot, or a newspaper, or something by means of which, with a magnifying glass, the date could be established."

April made a grimace of disgust. "Spying on people with a miniature camera," she said. "It's about the lowest form of blackmail I can think of."

"Yes — and it certainly gives us a reason for the man to have been murdered. I guess there are as many potential murderers as there are envelopes in this second series here! And talking of motive… I wonder if Harry could have been killed by a blackmail victim — and *still* be tied up in our affair?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Sheila was involved in a triangle. One member of the triangle was married. Despite what his wife said to me personally, Sir Gerald Wright could in fact quite easily have wished to keep the friendship to himself... It brings up the possibility that Harry Bosustow was murdered by a blackmailee who was the illicit boyfriend of his future sister-in- law!"

"Oh, now really!" April protested with a laugh. "We already have genuine sabotage and espionage, genuine murder, hypothetical attempted murder, blackmail and dope rings! Surely you can't —"

The door slammed open with a crash. The young man standing there with his hair plastered to his forehead was soaked from head to foot. But the old-fashioned revolver in his hand was dry—and it was steady.

Over the steady pelting of the rain, his voice climbed the scale in near hysteria. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And just what the hell d'you think you're doing in my brother's caravan?"

CHAPTER TEN: THE JEALOUS YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE

FOR a long moment there was complete silence. April Dancer, seated at the table in the act of raising a negative, froze with her hand in mid air. Only her eyes flicked upwards, to stare steadily at the man with the gun. Mark Slate hovered by her side, slightly crouched, his hands, with the fingers extended, held away from his body. And the young roan himself stood with his feet planted apart, regarding them both with blazing eyes.

Then a sudden gust of wind outside hurled an unusually heavy scatter of raindrops on to the caravan roof; the door slammed shut again; and the tension was broken.

"All right then," the young man cried hoarsely. "Over there, both of you — up against that wall. Put up your hands…"

He advanced another pace towards the table, gesturing menacingly with the revolver. Warily, Slate inched back, his eyes never leaving the boy's face. April could sense the restraint within him, suppressing energy like a coiled spring. She herself, however, continued to sit calmly at the table. The hand holding the negative fell naturally back to the surface. Otherwise she did not move.

"I said over there," the boy repeated. "Get moving."

"You must be poor Sheila's fiancé the youngest Bosustow. Ernie, isn't it?" the girl asked conversationally.

"What if I am? What is it to you? Get up!"

"Now let's not be melodramatic," April soothed. "You know perfectly well that you won't use that gun... that you can't use it..."

"I know nothing of the sort. If you don't get up and move over there, I warn you, I will use it." The boy' voice was shrill with hysteria. The gun had begun to shake slightly in his hand. As the knuckle of the forefinger whitened imperceptibly on the trigger, Mark gave an involuntary cry of alarm and warning.

"It's all right, Mark," April said quietly. "Don't worry. He won't shoot. He can't... That's a revolver from one of the sideshows. I recognised it at once. He must have been passing by, seen that there was someone

here and dashed back to the booth to get it. Even if it was loaded, it only fires a kind of superior airgun pellet — but I happen to know it can't be loaded because the girl always takes the ammunition home with her. He's just bluffing, that's all."

"It is *not* a sideshow gun! It's loaded with... I... I'll show you..." The boy was inarticulate with fury.

"Oh, come now!" April's cool voice, laced now with asperity, cut across him. "What kind of fools do you think we are? Of course it's a sideshow pistol. Look at the plate on the butt." She raised a hand and pointed.

Involuntarily, the young man dropped his eyes to the weapon in his hand — and in that instant the steel spring that was inside Mark uncoiled..

Arrowing across the caravan with one forearm extended, he caught the boy under the chin and forced him backwards as April leaned over the desk and plucked the revolver from his hand.

Bosustow slammed back against the door, made as though to punch at Mark's face, and then dropped unexpectedly to his hands and knees and jerked at the agent's ankles. Slate came down with a crash, back-somersaulted with the momentum of his fall and regained an upright position on his own knees as the boy scrambled to his feet again.

He ran in lightly and aimed a vicious kick at Slate's face. The agent swayed back on his heels and let the shoe whistle past his chin. By the time the boy had arrested his run and turned round, Mark was on his feet, waiting.

He stood stock still as the young man feinted to the left, darted to the right and then advanced, ducking easily under a roundarm swing which was telegraphed all the way. Then, as Bosustow's impetus carried him past, he stepped aside, swivelled on one heel and planted a single, scientific, short-arm jab carrying all his weight squarely in the boy's solar plexus.

Instantly, the fight was over. The boy doubled up as the breath whooshed from his lungs. For an instant he hung in the air like a question mark, then he dropped to the floor.

Solicitously, Mark hauled him to his feet, lowered him into a chair, massaged the middle of his chest, and then allowed his head, shoulders and arms to flop forward on to the table. As the air wheezed

back into the boy's lungs, Mark picked up the gun which April had dropped among the negatives and broke it open.

A moment later he exclaimed in surprise. "Look here — he wasn't bluffing!" he said. "This is not a sideshow pistol! It's loaded in all eight chambers...the shells are .32 calibre, I should think!" He shook the deadly slugs into the palm of his hand and raised his eyes to hers. "You knew, didn't you?" he asked softly.

"Of course I knew," the girl said coolly. "But there's more than one kind of bluff, isn't there? It was the only way I could think of to make him lower his eyes and give you an opportunity to do your stuff! I know how you love to make with the Superman routine."

Slate grinned. "Every man's Mum, that's you," he said lightly. "Good on you, just the same, as the Aussies say." He dropped a hand to her shoulder for a moment and then walked over to the boy.

The rasping sounds of returning breath had changed to a hoarse but more rhythmic noise. Ernie Bosustow was crying.

"Come on then, mate," the agent urged, not unkindly. "It's not the end of the world to be beaten in a little fight. And, after all, I am as you might say a professional! Sit up and let's have a word with you..."

But the boy kept his head buried in his arms, his shoulders continuing to shake.

After a moment, April and Slate exchanged glances and the girl moved over to the sobbing youth. "Ernie," she said quietly, laying an arm along his shoulders, "pull yourself together, man. Maybe we can help you. We're not really on the other side, you know."

He raised a red and puffy face and stared at her. "I'm sorry," he said at last in a low voice. "It wasn't the fight, you know. He beat me fair and square an' all, and I reckon I can take a hiding as well as the next man."

"What is it then? What's the trouble?"

"It's... it's... Oh, every goddam thing," the youth burst out. "Can't do right, can 'ee? Simply can't." He stared at the wooden wall of the caravan, blinking.

"You mean about Sheila, and...and your brother, and everything?" April said sympathetically. "I know. You do seem to have had a rough

deal."

"Rough deal be... Never mind. No, it's just everything. Every rotten thing. It's not enough that they have to kill my girl..." He swallowed and then went on: "... It's not enough that they make her fall for some loud-mouthed swaggerin' slob first, and we have words about it. It's not enough that they kill my brother — but they have t' bother their great fat heads suspectin' me of the murders!" His voice, which had been rising with anger, broke suddenly.

Mark Slate, mentally ticketing him as "Younger-son-with-chip-on-shoulder", reflected with an inward smile that he sounded for all the world like the pigeon who was afraid of serpents in "Alice".

"But, Ernie," April was saying reasonably, "you can hardly blame the police, can you? After all, you were heard to threaten Sheila — by several independent witnesses, too."

"Threaten her? I wouldn't have touched a hair on her head! Not me."

"But you were heard to say —"

"We had a quarrel. Sure we had a quarrel. I never said we never. Sure I said words to her — who doesn't have words when they're rowin'?"

"What kind of words?"

"Oh... You know I told her I'd break her ruddy neck if I as much as caught her lookin' at this popinjay again. I said I'd rather see her dead than go out with him..."

"Then, surely...?"

"But that's not *threatenin'*, is it? God, there's a world of difference between a man who says — kind of between his teeth, Like — 'I hate you. I'm going to kill you', and a mum, say, who tells her little girl: 'If you don't shut up that row, so help me, I'll strangle you!'... I mean, she don't strangle the little girl, does she?"

"Well, no. I see what you mean. But —"

"So what's the difference? When I tell Sheila I'll strangle her — or I'll break her neck or whatever — if I catch her lookin' at loud mouth again, I'm speakin' like that mum, aren't I? Figure of speech, that's what it is; just a figure of speech. I don't mean that I'll actually put my hands round her neck and choke the life out of her; I mean I'll be

ruddy furious... I mean I might even get cross enough to slosh her one. But that's all."

"There is one difference between you and your mum, though," April said gently. "As you said, that mum doesn't really strangle that little girl. But your little girl was strangled, as it were. Somebody did murder Sheila. And although I understand what you mean, when remarks like that are written down and read by someone who didn't hear the quarrel — well, they tend to appear just as bad, and just as menacing, as words from someone who speaks between his teeth and means it."

"But I tell you I wouldn't have harmed a hair on her head. Oh, forget it. You're just like all the rest," the boy muttered. He stared at her angrily, the bright blue eyes glittering in the characteristic, florid Bosustow face.

"There's one difference between us and what you call the rest," the girl said levelly.

"What's that? As if I cared." He bad relapsed into sulkiness now.

"Just this — that we're not interested so much in pinning the responsibility for the murder on somebody, as in finding out what really happened, in discovering just why she was killed — and who really did it."

Bosustow stared at her again. Slowly, he turned and gazed at Mark. "That's it," he said. "I'd forgotten. Who the hell are you, then? What are you doin' in Harry's caravan? What have you got to do with all this? — You don't sound like ordinary burglars, somehow."

For the second time, April Dancer exchanged meaning glances with Slate. Their eyes met, held, and then Slate imperceptibly nodded. The girl swung round and looked earnestly at the boy. "I'm going to take a chance on you," she said. "I'm going to let you in on something. But first, answer me a question: did your girl ever seem to be... well, a little odd, shall we say? I mean, was she like your other girlfriends? Or was she different in any way?"

"I'd never met anyone like her, if that's what you mean. She was... she was a knock-out. There'll never be anyone like Sheil." He sniffed and swallowed noisily.

"That's not what I mean exactly, Ernie. I meant... oh, things like punctuality, putting off a date, altering arrangements. That sort of

thing."

"Oh." He hesitated. "Well... yes, I guess she was a bit exasperatin' at times. How did you know?... I mean, she was forever changing the times we were to meet, and she did put off things, at that. I used to think she was maybe standin' me up, and that made me mad."

"Exactly." April paused impressively. "She wasn't standing you up, Ernie. She had to alter things because she had special work to do; work that was quite apart from her sideshow here at the circus, important work."

"You don't mean..." He stared at her unbelievingly. "You don't mean... *secret* work?"

The girl nodded. How fortunate, she reflected, that the current fads in television and cinema entertainment had acclimatised people like Ernie to accept without question that to be a secret agent was to have a *métier* as commonplace — if perhaps slightly more glamorous — as that of postman, doctor or insurance salesman! "I can't tell you any more," she said. "I'm not allowed to. But we are colleagues of hers... And that's why we must find out who killed her and why... We should like it very much if you could help."

"Well, of course. Anything at all..." The boy was obviously vastly flattered. "And to think my Sheil was working… And I never suspected a word! It was connected with the Tor, I suppose?"

"Indirectly," Mark said, with a glance at April.

"Ah. That accounts for it, then. She was always on about taking walks up on them blasted moors. Spent half her time up there, it seemed at times... That's where she met him up there."

"Him?"

"Sir Flipping You-know-who, Mister Blooming Right," the boy said scornfully. "Chatting her up with his blah voice; taking her to Falmouth and Truro and buying her expensive dinners; setting her against me, just because I don't have his crust or his arrogance!" He made as though to spit, thought better of it, and contented himself with a derisive shrug.

"He took her out often?"

"When it suited his book. When he wasn't living it up with every army

and air force officer in every mess from here to Exeter."

"Oh, he visited lots of army messes?"

"All of 'em, Oh, very popular with the top brass, Sir Gerald was — and still is, for that matter. He was always being invited to this station and that camp. I suppose they thought he added tone...*Tone!*" he added scornfully.

"Who else did Sheila see — when she wasn't with you, I mean?" April asked, "Did she have any special friends? Any girlfriends, for instance?"

"I don't think so. She was quite chummy with Sara — my sister, that is — though of course Sara's much older. And I think she had a friend who used to be a nurse with her, over by Redruth. I never paid special heed."

"Who do *you* think killed her?" Mark Slate demanded abruptly.

"*Who?*" The Bosustow face darkened suddenly in fury. "Who d'you think killed her? *He* did, of course! Who else could — or would — have killed her? Who else had the motive, the opportunity? Who was the last to be seen with her? Who else was that sort of dirty, rotten, stinking —"

"All right, all right, all right," Slate cut in peremptorily. "That's quite enough of that. We understand you have cause to dislike this man. That's still no proof that he's a murderer, you know. What do you mean by motive?"

"He wanted her out of the way. He —"

"Why?"

"Why? Because he had tired of her, I suppose. He wanted to get rid of her. Once he'd had his way... he was afraid she'd spill the beans to his wife. He had to shut her mouth once it was over."

"Oh, then there were beans to spill? His attentions were not — er — unwelcome?"

"He'd dazzled her all right, if that's what you mean. There'd been some kind of an affair between them. I'm not denying it."

"Did she deny it, though? And so far as the wife was concerned, do

you know that she knew all about this friendship and didn't mind at all? She told me so herself."

"Ah, yes," the boy sneered, "that's what she says now. Ask her if she knew about it a week ago, a fortnight! She's saying that to make it look better for her husband, to protect him."

"But if she didn't know about the friendship, if in other words she might be expected to object when she did find out — then why should she wish to protect him anyway?" April asked reasonably.

"Those kind of people aren't like you and me," the boy said. "Anyway, she'd do it because she wouldn't want to lose a good meal ticket, wouldn't she?"

"Leaving the actual motive aside for the moment," Mark put in, "what's the strength of the opportunity bit? And how do we know he was the last to see her alive?"

"Well, we had this blazin' row, see, her and me — and the upshot of that was that she walked out on me. We were in my caravan at the time. And then she met him: he'd called by her booth, the way he sometimes did. They left the field together and they arranged to meet later. Several people waiting for the bus heard them. Then he went off down the hill and she caught the bus. And that's the last...nobody ever saw her..." He choked on his words.

"He claims she never turned up for their date. She stood him up the way she sometimes stood you up. That's what he says," Mark pointed out.

"Well, wouldn't you?" the boy demanded. "What else could he say? And talking of excuses, I still don't see why you're here. I understand who you are and what you're doin' — but I don't understand what you're doin' *here*... in my brother's caravan."

"Finding out about Sheila, of course," April said smoothly. "Since your poor brother seems to have been murdered too, we thought that if we could find out something about that, it might help us solve the mystery of her killer."

"No mystery about that, like I said." Ernie Bosustow paused. "He was a bit surly and he had his faults, but he was a good enough bloke, Harry. Me and the old man don't get on too well — it was Harry did the things for me that the old man should of done. Like a father, I mean... If you find out anything about who killed him..." His voice

tailed away once more.

"Don't worry," April said. "We'll pass on anything of interest that we find out — and for your part, you can standby and be ready to help us in our hunt for the murderer of Sheila, eh?"

"Of course, of course. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing yet, Ernie. But keep alert. If we want you to help, it will be in a hurry and you must come running; okay?"

The boy's eyes had brightened. "Anything you say," he replied.

"There's just one thing more," Slate said. "When you're up at your hut on the moors, Ernie, working the Serpentine concession or turning up the souvenirs, how do you make the lighthouses?"

"How do you mean 'How'?"

"What way do you fabricate them? How do you do it?"

"Well, I get a suitable piece of the rock, chip it roughly to shape and then fix it to the lathe spindles. Once she's spinning, I advance the cutting tool and take off more or less as required — for the gallery, you know, and the lantern, and the part where it swells out below."

"You don't ever make them in two parts, with a top that screws into the bottom?"

"Not even the big ones. I don't see the point. Costs more to make, it's more difficult to produce — and what's the advantage? No spindle scars, that's all... Kind of people buy these things, you must realise, couldn't care less about spindle scars. Even so, we usually fill them and polish over, just in case."

"That's clear enough," April said. "You have never turned a double lighthouse — and, I suppose, you've never turned a Porphyry one in black?"

"Porphyry?" the boy said, astonished. "Not a lighthouse. Neither in black nor any other colour. That's a new one, I must say: a black Porphyry *lighthouse!*" He chuckled.

"Sir Gerald Wright thinks so too. He even sent his wife to get hold of one the other day, just after the murder. There was nothing for her, though."

"You know what I think of Sir Bleeding Gerald," the boy said.

"I know," the girl replied. "But I don't know what *I* think of him. Since he's a man of so many parts, with so many conflicting opinions about him, I think the least I can do is manoeuvre a chance meeting with this Lothario!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A WALK OVER THE CLIFFS

THE following day was a Saturday. For the present, the weather seemed to have cleared: after the rainstorm which had lasted all night, a Force Seven gale had blown away the clouds and whipped the breakers along the cliffs into a battlefield of exploding foam. Inland at the head of the valley, however, where the bare trees took the brunt of the wind's fury, the circus field was relatively sheltered and there was quite a crowd of locals profiting from the pale winter sunshine.

Mark Slate sauntered in with a mob of giggling youths and girls soon after two o'clock. There was still a policeman on duty at the gate but he was deep in conversation with a tanned man who was wearing a fisherman's cap. Canned music blared from a juke-box somewhere in the middle of the sideshows and there was a lot of shouting and laughter competing with the cries of the barkers, the snap of rifles from the target booths, and the screaming of teenagers in a miniature hall of mirrors.

Children darted and tumbled between the knots of people gathering outside the kiosks.

Slate was heading, as unobtrusively as possible, for April's caravan. She had left it unlocked so that he could sit there, unseen and unheard, and talk to her over their Communicators while she made a reconnaissance of Sir Gerald Wright's big house on the cliff top beyond the Tor. The booth was being looked after by Sara, the equestrienne, who seemed to have taken a fancy to the girl from U.N.C.L.E. and had at once offered to deputize for her when April had pleaded urgent family business in Truro.

He threaded his way past a group of swarthy country boys crowded around a red-faced man in a tight brown suit who seemed to be knocking all the coconuts from their stands, and wandered up towards the canvas immensity of the Big Top. The sewn panels, battened down but bellying slightly in the wind, were drying out from grey to a

bleached white.

In the aisle between the two rows of trailers, all was quiet: the fairground sound-effects were muted to a distant cacophony of three different jukeboxes playing different tunes with, a little nearer, an overlay of maniac laughter relayed from a tape loop in one of the "novelty" booths.

By the caravan in which April was staying, he paused to check that nobody was in sight, and then trod purposefully up the short ladder and went inside. Through the window above the narrow bunk bed, he gazed out over the cascade of slate roofs spilling down the valley to the harbour with its tangle of swaying masts. Somewhere along the wind-swept coastguard path which clung to the cliffs beyond, April was tramping towards Sir Gerald's house. Experimentally, he pulled the Communicator from his pocket, drew out its telescopic aerial and thumbed the call button.

The girl's immediate answer took him by surprise. "Channel open," she said; "and don't think I don't envy you, sitting there in my nice warm trailer while I'm up here in the teeth of a gale! Thank goodness I wore my thickest trousers and a sheepskin coat!"

"I only half expected a reply, as a matter of fact," said Slate. "I fancied you might not yet be far enough away from the madding crowd to talk. You must have made good time. Where are you?"

"Just rounding the corner of the headland below the Tor, where the cliffs dip down to Tregunda Cove. The Wrights keep a small boat there, I believe. A few more yards, and I shall be out of sight of Porthallow and in sight of their house up above the cove."

Involuntarily, the agent raised his eyes and stared once more out of the window. At this distance, even had he known where to look, a human figure would be indistinguishable against the great sweep of the Tor; it was hard enough to pick out the path to the old coastguard station, charting its sinuous course across the moorland with an occasional patch of fuchsia or briar or valerian showing dark against the Cornish heath. Yet somewhere on that jagged skyline was the owner of the melodious voice which was now proceeding from the pen-shaped instrument in his hand.

"What exactly are your plans, April?" he asked. "I'd like to know the form so that I can keep in touch mentally, as it were, if for some reason you have to make short, cryptic comments later — or if you

can't come through at all, for that matter."

"All my comments are cryptic." The girl's voice had a hint of mockery in it. "And they'll certainly be short if my breath has to cope with climbing against this wind much longer! But, so far as I know, my aim is to stray from this straight and anything-but-narrow path as soon as I'm within reasonable distance of chez-Wright..."

"Straying from paths when he's around seems an easy task, from what I hear!" Mark observed.

"... and then to try and strike up an acquaintance with him by wandering onto his property and — as they say — engaging him in light conversation. I understand from spies in the circus that he customarily spends Saturday afternoons at home… and that his wife usually goes into Helston shopping at the same time."

"Okay. On your own pretty head be it! When can I expect to hear from you?"

"Give me a half hour. I should be approaching the property then, and I can give you a clearer idea of what's what. At the moment, all I can say is that those coastguards must have had feet of iron!" April sounded more breathless than ever as she picked her way along the rocky track.

Mark glanced at his watch, peered through the window to check that all was clear, and slipped out of the caravan. It seemed a little colder. He looked up at the sky and saw that the sunlight was now filtering through an immensely high gauze of cirrus which some stratospheric wind had teased out from the west.

The sideshows were more crowded still and the youth of Porthallow, red of face and long of hair, were thronging the two small arcades of pinball machines, laughing boisterously and indulging in ritual horseplay with the linked-arm duos and trios of girls. Ephraim Bosustow, a false grin scything his face, was acting as barker outside the sham gypsy caravan in which his wife consulted her crystal ball, and the middle brother — Mark had never heard his christian name — was twirling his waxed moustache at the clients in the shooting gallery. The biggest crowd of all was encircling the Bingo stall, where the widow of the late Harry Bosustow chanted the traditional couplets as she raked in the revenue that she was in due course going to conceal.

Slate smiled at Sara Bosustow behind the counter of the Serpentine

souvenir booth and strolled towards the gate. Really, he thought, apart from the absence of someone pestering the clients to have their photographs taken, the circus was going about its daily business as though the blackmailer had never existed...

He was a few yards from the gate when somebody hailed him. He swung round. Superintendent Curnow, blue eyes twinkling, was talking to the man on duty.

"Hallo, there, Mr. Slate," the policeman called. "What are you doing up here, eh? Soaking up a bit of our local colour or trying to make your hotel expenses at the Bingo stall?"

"Taking an afternoon off, if you must know," the agent grinned. He walked over and shook hands. "How are your enquiries going? May we, the public, expect an early arrest?"

Curnow's expressive face darkened. "I'm not too sure of that," he said, "and that's the truth. We can't make up our minds whether the two murders are connected or not. On the one hand, there are things about the manner of them, the particular kind of callousness involved, that make me think they are; on the other hand, despite the fact that both victims worked here, there seems little doubt that there is nothing motive-wise to connect them... As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to Harry Bosustow's caravan now to collect all his negatives. We received an anonymous tip-off today that there might be something there — and while we don't normally act on anonymous letters, we have to explore every avenue we can in a murder case, don't we?"

"How do you mean 'something there'?" Mark asked. "Haven't you gone over the caravan? — If you don't mind my asking, that is."

"Naturally we have. But we didn't actually take out each individual negative and project it; we just saw the kind of thing they were and, as it were, filed them away for future reference. Our unknown helper seems to think there may actually be a clue in the subjects of these pictures. So we have to look just in case."

"I see. Any other developments?"

"Not in the case of Miss Duncan, no. But the pathologist in Penzance passed on a message from the lab that may have a bearing on Harry Bosustow's murder. It seems there were traces of paint behind the knees of his trousers — and it's a paint sold by ship's chandlers. Carries a built-in rust-inhibitor and an anti-saltwater-corrosion agent."

"So it looks as though...?"

"It looks as though it's a clue to the craft he was taken out and drowned in. Marked his trousers when he struggled as they pushed him over the gunwale, I guess. Poor devil."

"It's fresh paint, is it?"

"Oh, yes. Been painted pretty recently, the lab said, otherwise it'd never have come off in sufficient quantities to register like that— specially after a few hours of immersion."

"Can you trace it to any specific boat here?"

"Not here, no. I had thought perhaps he might have been taken off in one of the crabbers — he was pretty friendly with some of the crews. But there's not but five fishing boats left in Porthallow today, and every one of them's blue and black with a white line around her waist."

"The paint was none of those colours, I assume?"

"Bless you, no. Didn't I say...? No, it was a very unusual colour — and that may be a help or it may be a hindrance; it all depends. All we know for certain is that there's no craft in Porthallow painted that way."

"What was the colour?"

"It's a kind of orangey-red. Oriental Dawn, they call it!" Curnow chuckled. "The names they think of! But it's an odd colour for the outside of a boat, and that's the truth."

"It couldn't have been from the inside? From a cabin, for instance?"

The policeman shook his head. "No. That's one thing they were sure about. It came from a gunwale. They can tell by the way it's come off on the material, for one thing. For another, there were traces of salt in it. And fish scales."

"So all you have to do is look for a boat…

"With a hull in Oriental Dawn. Exactly. As I say, it may be a help or it may be a hindrance... Here, I say, look at the time! I must be getting along for those photos."

"Good luck, then," Mark said.

"We shall probably need it, Mr. Slate. We shall probably need it... I say, I do like that coat! Those short overcoats are very practical, aren't they… I could do with one like that when I'm out on the moors sometime with the Customs and Excise boys!"

The agent smiled at his unabashed enthusiasm and began to walk back towards April's caravan. He must leave Curnow time to start ferretting about in the locker below the bed before he re-entered the adjacent trailer…

Sara Bosustow called him over as he passed the Serpentine booth. "Saw you talking to the Law," she said. "Haven't they arrested Handsome Gerry yet?... I can't for the life of me think why they don't pull him in. Everyone but them knows he's the one as killed Sheila... and it wouldn't surprise me if he done in poor Harry too." Her smouldering eyes filled with tears at the memory.

"Don't worry, Sara," he said. "I'm sure they'll pull in the murderer as soon as they have all the evidence they need — whoever it is." He waved and went on.

Round a corner behind the sideshows, he almost ran full tilt into Curnow again. The Superintendent was talking to Ernie Bosustow — and the boy's face was dark with rage. "... call off your rotten tails and leave me alone," he was saying defiantly, "or, so help me, I'll turn round and land one of the bleeders such a swipe as he'll never forget! Give a dog a bad name, that's your motto, isn't it? Just because I got a bit of a temper, then I'm the one must of done it."

"That's enough of that, Bosustow. Drop it now," Curnow grated — sounding very different from the slow-spoken saloon-bar friend Mark had just left.

"Drop it, is it?" the boy raved. "Just because you're determined to railroad me into gaol for a murder someone else committed, I'm supposed to sit tight and say 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir' and 'Thank you, Mr. Curnow' — is that it?"

"You know that isn't true —"

"I know a social climber when I see one, and I know the real murderer has a handle to his name — so I know, too, how much chance I have of getting a fair trial! And talking of trials, why don't you arrest me? Go on, take me in... I'll come. Arrest me! Maybe a jury would give me a better deal than I get here."

"I'm a patient man, lad, but if you don't button that lip..."

Slate rolled his eyes heavenwards and turned back. Neither man had seen him. If he hurried round the other way, he could make the caravan before the policeman reached Bosustow's next door.

He had only just closed the door and sunk, panting, to the bed when the bleep of his Communicator told him that April was ready to talk again. He snatched it from his pocket and pulled up the aerial.

"Channel open," he said crisply. "How goes the walk?"

"Freezing!" the girl's voice said. "But the breakers down below the path as you walk round the corner into the cove are something to write home about. Fabulous!"

"Plenty of spray for you?"

"Mark, the cliff must be nearly a hundred and fifty feet high there — and it seems as though some of the big ones are going to wet the top when they break! The seagulls are being tossed about like confetti!"

"We note your remarks and are pleased that you are happy in your work. To return to the subject of the operation, however— where are you now?"

"Like all your generation, you're an anti-romantic!"

"Comes of being an anti-hero, I suppose. I always was fashionable."

"Is it fashionable to be corny? — Don't answer that. I'm up above the cove now. I've just passed a coastguard station — a kind of wooden hut on a bit of the cliff that rises higher than the rest. I don't think it can be used any more. Everything is boarded up and closed."

"No, it isn't. There's none between here and Coverack. That's used any more, I mean... Tell me, just how does the land lie there?"

"Well, as I said, the cliffs are about a hundred and fifty feet sheer, then there's a kind of grassy shelf, sometimes narrow, sometimes wide, along which this path runs. And then above that the ground shoots up again — not a cliff but a steep slope with rock outcrops — until it reaches the Tor. Beyond the cove, the cliffs are much higher, much wilder — but the ground on top of them is practically flat, with fields and things."

"So the total height is less than the Tor?... Wright's house is at the head of the cove, is it?"

"Yes, it's just come into sight as I walk along. It's a big, low rambling place with thatched roofs. There's a little valley — the stream runs out into the cove — and it's tucked away among a grove of trees there. Looks as though there are a dozen rooms or more and quite a few outhouses."

"Any sign of life?"

"It's so sheltered it's difficult to see, really. But there are two cars — a big Citroen and a shooting brake — and I think I heard a couple of shots a few minutes ago. Presumably Joyful Gerald is out after the dinner."

"You be careful, miss. There are no other houses there, I suppose?

"No. The only way down to the cove itself is a steep set of stairs carved out of the rock: it's completely surrounded by cliffs. There's a small boathouse on a ledge at the bottom, a slipway slanting down to the beach, and then the sand itself. That's all. At the moment, there are about ten lines of rollers sweeping into the cove — it's one of those long, narrow ones — and the sand looks pretty wet!"

"You've got the Tor behind, cliffs and fields on the far side of the cove, and this house in the valley. What's inland — beyond the house?"

"You can see the road climbing the valley until it reaches the moor — where the land has dropped away from Trewinnock Tor. And then the moorland itself seems to have flattened out a bit there. I'm just... Oh, yes! Mark, I've just rounded a rock outcrop and of course you can see the whole DEWS station laid out before you, where the moor flattens out. The masts and reflectors are about a half mile inland from Wright's house — he must have a marvellous view of them! — and the blockhouses and everything are another quarter of a mile beyond that."

"Then the road to the house must be a private road, just going there and nowhere else, which passes fairly close to the station?"

"I guess so... Mark, I'm leaving the path now. There's a stile with a footpath leading inland and a notice saying that trespassers will be prosecuted... I'll call you back."

Fifteen minutes later, Slate was summoned to the Communicator

again by another series of bleeps.

"Mark!" — the girl's voice was full of suppressed excitement "I've just seen the man himself. He's out with a shot gun — and believe it or not, he's actually wearing tweed plus-fours... you know, those baggy Norfolk breeches that tuck into woollen socks! He looks like a New York ad for whisky!"

"Has he seen you?"

"Oh, yes. He waved and he shouted and he tried to warn me off in various ways — then he started to come towards me, since I steadfastly refused to understand him. A moment ago, he started shouting something again, but I pretended not to hear. He's down in a dip now — we're quite near the house — and as soon as he breasts the rise I'll have to stop talking."

"What are you going to do?"

"Turn on the full charm" — her voice was low and hurried

— "and see if I can persuade him to ask me in for a cup of tea. After that, I'll leave it to my intuition! I'll keep my eyes open, see what information I can get by playing the dumb brunette, and generally play it by ear."

"Yes, April, that's all very well, but—"

"*Oh, hallo! Do please forgive me, but is this private property? I'm trying to get back to Porthallow without going along the cliff path — I do suffer from vertigo — and I'm afraid I must have lost my way*." The voice was loud, a little brash, inexperience hiding behind a mask of over-confidence… but it was still unmistakably April's. Slate instantly switched off the "Send" button on his Communicator but left the aerial extended.

"My dear young lady!" Sir Gerald Wright's voice was equally recognizable. "There are notices absolutely all over the place!... Still, as you're here, I suppose…"

"I'm most frightfully sorry... so stupid of me. If you could kindly point out the right way to me..."

"You might have been winged, you know. I've been shooting. Those notices are there for a reason... No, I'm afraid the cliff path is the only way back to Porthallow from here — but one can hardly allow a

beautiful young lady... a very beautiful young lady, if you'll permit me... to suffer vertigo on account of that. I'm going into town later. You must let me run you there in the car. You're not in a hurry, I hope?... Anyway, we'd be there as quickly as you would walking all the way along the cliff."

"Well, gosh, that's terribly kind of you... but, I mean, I hardly like to..." April's nicely judged blend of reluctance with the eagerness of a young woman flattered by an older man would have drawn appreciative smiles from the histrionics instructors back in the U.N.C.L.E. building in New York.

"Not at all, not at all, not at all." Wright's smooth tones were overriding her. "I must positively insist, my dear young lady. While we're waiting... I have to — er — wait for a telephone call, you know... I shall show you over my little place we have a splendid view... and perhaps you'll join me in a rather early aperitif, eh? Splendid!"

"Well, it's terribly kind of you..." April began again, and then — no doubt as they turned to walk up towards the house — there was a click and the Communicator went dead. Presumably she'd put it back in her handbag with the numerous other gadgets she carried there, Mark thought with an inward smile. Oh, well — good luck to her... In the meantime, he had some chores to attend to.

Tucking the little transceiver into his breast pocket, so that he would run no risk of missing the signal if she should call again, he ran down the steps and off towards the sideshows and the gate. There was no sign of life from the converted pantechnicon next door: presumably Curnow had taken the locker of photos and gone.

Back at the harbour-side inn, the receptionist told Slate that there had been a telephone message for him. Asking her to call back the number, he slipped into the below-stairs niche that served as public phone booth and waited for the connection to be made. Through a small window, he could see spray exploding over the sea wall like infrared shell bursts against the darkening sky. The tide was almost high and the craft riding at anchor there rose and fell uneasily as the unaccustomed swell flowed in between the breakwaters.

The message had been from the laboratories in Truro to whom he had consigned the white powder they had scraped from the secret compartment in the lighthouse. The voice on the line was crisp and businesslike over the West Country burr. "Mr. Slate?... Sorry to trouble

you to ring back, but I thought you might like to know — and a letter won't reach you until Monday. We have some information for you here... though I'm afraid it's negative rather than positive, if you see what I mean!" The voice chuckled. "Only you won't see what I mean until I've told you."

"I'm sorry," Mark said patiently. "I'm afraid I'm not quite…"

"Not quite with me? Not to worry. Happens all the time! The point is, that white powder you sent in for analysis is nothing whatever to do with any drug. Absolutely not."

"Oh. All right then: what is it?"

"Nothing more nor less than Serpentine dust, old boy! The fragmented residue of a veined igneous stone peculiar to these parts, I believe. Mixed with a very small quantity of carborundum dust — which leads me to suppose that your lighthouse gathered its dust either in the place where it was made or one very much like it. It was a Serpentine lighthouse?"

"No. It was made from Porphyry, actually — but Serpentine dust could easily have blown into it if it was made in the same workshop, I suppose. You do mean to imply that this dust — and the carborundum — comes from the wheel they use to turn these souvenirs?"

"Couldn't swear to it, laddie — but say I'd be very surprised if it wasn't, eh? The dust and chippings look much lighter than the original stone or the polished article, you know."

"Understand. Let's take it, then, that it's a natural place to —"

"There is one other thing, though," the technician was saying. "It turns out that there are also minute — and I mean really *small* — traces of film stock celluloid in amongst the powder."

"Celluloid! Film stock!... What... what kind of film stock?"

"Well, as it happens, I can tell you, chum. Probably because there is so much copying of documents to do down here, with all these secret stations all over the shop, we do happen to have made a qualitative study of film celluloids, photo-copying materials and similar stuff — in particular those used for micro film rolls, which are quite different from the others. They have to be far more flexible, you see, and the emulsion must —"

"And the traces... ?" Mark interrupted, excitement quickening his voice.

"Are of that kind. They're from a micro-roll."

"Let me get this straight: there are microscopic traces of this celluloid mixed in with the white powder?"

"Right. That's what I meant by a negative reply… *negative*, see!"

"What kind of traces? If you can say, that is."

"Well, they're more scrapings than anything else, really. But they are very small."

"Would they be consistent...No, let me put it this way. The powder was found in a small cylindrical recess in this Porphyry lighthouse. Are your celluloid scrapings consistent with a roll of microfilm having been inserted... pushed perhaps... into that cavity?"

"How wide is the cavity?"

"Half to three-quarters of a centimetre, roughly, I should say."

"Then they would, then. Yes. Porphyry's a rough stone with very large crystals. A recess for secreting microfilm wouldn't be polished like the outside, and the usual size roll would certainly get a trifle scraped along the edge when it was shoved in there."

"Thus the scrapings, thus the minute traces of celluloid?"

"Thus the scrapings."

"Thank you," Mark said. "Thank you very much indeed."

He walked slowly back into the bar — darkened now until the official opening time at half past five — and sat down.

He was conscious that both he and April had been deliberately reserving judgment on one crucial aspect of the mystery: if illicit drugs were being supplied to those in the know through the medium of the lighthouses with the secret compartments, then had the late Sheila Duncan been in on the deal, or had she been an unknowing accomplice?

Now, however, now that it had been conclusively established that there was no drug involved, a different question arose. For if it was

proved — as it seemed to be — that the Porphyry lighthouses had been used simply as a means of secretly transporting microfilm, then it must also be asked: first, what could the microfilms depict; secondly, who could have taken them? And to each question, in view of the people known to be involved, there seemed to Slate to be only one answer...

It would be too much of a coincidence to expect the films to be of anything else but the DEWS station and other secret NATO installations on Trewinnock Tor and the surrounding moors; and who was there more likely to have taken them than Sir Gerald Wright — the rich man whose house overlooked the Tor, the popular local squire who was so frequent a guest in all the military messes of the area? Moreover, if it was Wright who was the secret spy passing out filmed information, then what arose at once was: who was receiving this information? And in view of the data passed on to April Dancer by Waverly, there could again only be one answer to this — the Council of THRUSH, who would be eager to exploit the information both for their own underground purposes and to sow discord among the great powers.

Mark rose to his feet and strode to the window. It was getting dark and the ebbing tide was lowering the masts and rigging in the harbour, though the wind still howled above his head in the chimneys of the old inn. He passed one hand agitatedly through his short, fair hair. He was very worried.

For if the squire was indeed working thus for THRUSH, and if his late girlfriend had been in charge of the booth from which the lighthouses containing the film had been collected, then it scarcely seemed likely that she had been unaware of what was going on. Had it been only drugs, and had they been unconnected with Wright, then it might just have been possible that Sheila was in ignorance of the deal. But since it was a matter of espionage — and directly connected with her boyfriend at that — then there seemed little doubt at all.

But if Sheila Duncan had known that Wright was passing microfilmed information about the NATO installations to THRUSH, and more particularly if she had herself connived at this, then the possibility — the near certainty — arose that she had in fact been a double agent.

And if the dead girl had been a double agent, then was it not likely that the squire, her boyfriend, had been aware of everything she herself knew about U.N.C.L.E.?

In which case, the squire might very well know — in detail — all about April and Mark... the squire into whose head quarters April Dancer had just voluntarily delivered herself...

Slate snapped a match he had picked up from an ashtray viciously in two and strode from the room. In the yard behind the pub, he hurled himself into the driving seat of the Matra-Bonnet, gunned the motor furiously for a few moments, and then rocketed out on to the quay and headed for the square and the road leading up to the Tor.

If the girl from U.N.C.L.E. had delivered herself into the hands of the enemy, then it was up to him to get her out!

CHAPTER TWELVE: APRIL'S BAG OF TRICKS

"IT'S frightfully nice of you to bother to come and see me, Miss Dancer," Sir Gerald Wright had said abruptly, swinging round from the cocktail cabinet in his elegant drawing room and staring April in the eye, "though I do rather regret the stratagem — the duplicity, I might almost say — which led you to pretend you had missed your way on my property."

"I'm afraid I don't quite…"

"Oh, come, Miss Dancer! I had expected better of the stalwarts of U.N.C.L.E."

"The stalwarts of what?" She had stared at him in a dismay she could barely conceal.

"My dear young woman, pray do not trifle with me. You are a general assignment agent from the New York head quarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. You are a graduate of a New England college and a descendant of David Harum. You are here, I imagine, on account of that troublesome young woman at the circus who turned out to be a part-time agent for your organisation — and your colleague from Section Two on this assignment is a 31-year-old transfer from London Headquarters named Mark Slate. Do I make myself clear?"

The girl had swallowed a mouthful of her sherry and set the glass carefully down on a Sheraton occasional table. "So," she had said with a coolness she was far from feeling, "the cards are on the table, are

they? Then you, one assumes, must be from the organisation called THRUSH?"

His tanned face had creased briefly into a smile totally with out humour. "I have that honour — not the Council... yet... but I am in charge of the particular Satrap which has been milking the secrets of Trewinnock Tor. A task which will be completed tonight, as it happens."

"Then you won't mind telling me all about it?"

"On the contrary, Miss Dancer. We of THRUSH are trained to take things for granted. The assignment is due to terminate tonight; you are most unlikely to leave this house alive — yet mistakes do happen, have happened. It profits me nothing to tell you how clever we are; I know how clever we are. In the books, the spy about to be liquidated is told all and then escapes to worst his adversaries. In real life the spy does not escape — and to tell him anything at all is a sheer waste of time."

"May I ask what you propose to do as far as I am concerned, then?"

"I shall probably simply eliminate you. I may decide to extract some information from you first, but there are other, more important things to be done before we bother with you. That is why we have not considered it worth while to try for a third time to kill Mr. Slate. There will be plenty of time for that this evening... If there were more time, however, I should find it... agreeable, shall we say?...to spend a little time persuading you to talk."

"I thought your wife lived here with you?"

"She is a tolerant woman — and with her, as with me, the success of the operation, loyalty to THRUSH, comes before any thing else."

"Suppose I decide I don't wish to stay and be murdered?"

"It is not a decision which rests with you, I am afraid. This pleasant rambling house, these leisured pieces of antique furniture, those lawns you see through the French windows — they are all rather deceptive. I have only two men under me here, but they are tough and well trained. With them and my wife, plus our electric fences and various other — ah — ingenious devices, we aim to succeed in keeping out those whom we do not wish to enter. And of course retain those whom we do not wish to leave."

"Well, that's the most ridicul — the most ridic —" April had begun.. . and then suddenly she wasn't speaking clearly any more; suddenly she wasn't speaking at all. Suddenly she was on the floor.

The sherry, of course, she had thought blearily. How silly of me! And after that there had been a blank. The next thing she had known was a sudden awareness of cold, a sensation of hardness beneath her back (she must have been dumped on the floor in a passageway), and a strange voice asking: "What about her handbag, then?"

Wright's voice, as smooth as ever, had replied: "Handbag? Let me see...keys, money, licence, lipstick, lighter, comb, packet of sweets...that looks innocuous enough. Chuck it in there with her for the moment. We'll dispose of it later. Colonel Forsett and his wife are due at any moment and I don't want to run the risk of them seeing it..."

She had heard a door open and felt the sensation of being lifted, and then once again there was a total blank.

Now here she was, painfully reassembling these fragments of memory to work out how and why she came to be sitting hunched up on the floor of a damp, cold cellar.

Shaking her head to clear it from the lingering effects of the knock-out drops she had unwittingly taken, she looked around her. The cellar was about twelve feet square, with walls of granite slabs and a flagged floor. Apart from a tea chest full of old boxes and papers which stood near the iron-bound door, it was completely empty. Judging from the quality of the light filtering through a high window opposite the door, it was almost dusk. Through the window she could see an outhouse wall topped by thatched eaves, and a triangle of sky. The cellar must be in the basement of the big house, she assumed.

She listened. There was the kind of heavy silence that characterises Sunday afternoons in early spring. Not far away, a tap dripped monotonously into a bucket of water and, a long way above, something — a shutter perhaps? — continuously banged in the wind.

Moving a little to see whether she could discern anything more through the window, she was startled to feel coldness, weight, restriction, and to hear the unmistakable rattle of iron on stone.

She realized she was chained up like a dog!

There was a heavy iron anklet clamped around the soft leather of her

left boot, from each side of which a loop of metal projected. To one of these, a similar bracelet encircling her right wrist was padlocked; and from the other, a short length of chain led to a ring concreted into the cellar wall.

Experimentally, she tried to pull her foot out of the boot but found that the anklet was too tight.

Next, with her free hand she turned the two iron circles around to see how they were locked on to her limbs. Like the padlock joining them, they were old, slightly rusty, but strong and they were closed by double catches of the type used on old-fashioned suitcases, which homed into a slit and then were locked in place. The chain — it was about three feet long — was of heavy one-inch links. It seemed to April to make a great deal of noise each time she moved.

Struggling to her feet, she found that the iron ring was set into the wall at such a height that she had the minimum of lateral movement: she could hobble one pace to either side or one pace out towards the centre of the cellar, and that was that...

From the doubled-up position imposed on her by the diagonal wrist-to-ankle attachment, she squinted again through the window. She could see a little more wall, a little more sky, but that was all. In the wedge of darkening blue, the shape of a seagull hung motionless with outspread wings. Distantly, she heard the bird uttering its mewing cry, and then it floated out of sight beyond the thatch.

Sighing, April lowered herself to the floor again. She was still wearing her sheepskin coat, but there was nothing in the pockets that might help her to break free... and then, suddenly, she recalled that fragmentary scrap of dialogue about the handbag. Had she dreamed it, or was the handbag really in here with her...?

Desperately, she looked once more around the cell. And there it was: It was lying on its side, the handles away from her, which was why she had not noticed it before.

The only thing was — the handbag was on the far side of the cellar, over near the tea chest, and she couldn't reach it.

She fell forward on to her knees and stretched out with her free hand. It was a good eighteen inches away from the bag.

Next she advanced as far as the chain would allow, then lifted her left leg until the links were parallel to the floor, and hopped forward the

additional step that this permitted. But with her right wrist attached to the raised leg, the resulting contorted posture left her worse off than before. Finally she cast herself down on her side, flattened her shoulder-blades on the flagstones, and groped blindly up behind her head in the manner of a swimmer's backstroke. She couldn't see where her hand was going, but it seemed a little nearer.

A moment later, her outstretched fingertips touched the hard, cold surface of the crocodile bag.

She turned her hand this way and that but could find nothing to grasp hold of. Frenziedly, she shifted her position, brushing the backs of her knuckles along the smooth skin. The bag moved slightly away from her.

April bit back a groan of disappointment. Then, struck by an idea, she sat up and stared at the bag, pursed her lips, and lay down once more on the floor. If she was able to move one end of the bag away from her... and if the floor was not too rough... and if she could hit the crocodile blindly, in the right place.. . then the other end might swivel round towards her and give her fingers something they could grab hold of. It was worth a try.

Again the stretched fingers brushed the hard base of the bag, seeking the end. Ah — this was it! Holding her breath, she drew two fingers slightly towards her and then jerked them outwards, against the bag.

There was a slight scraping noise and her fingers touched air… Now — had she merely pushed the whole thing away, or had it swivelled?

Carefully, she eased her hand back the other way. The side of the little finger touched a cold surface. Hardly daring to breathe, she turned her wrist over. The tip of her middle finger, exploring, found the sewn edge of the bag, beyond which the calf sidepiece concertinaed inwards.

With infinite care, she closed middle finger and forefinger over the edge, and with the bag thus scissored between them precariously, began to draw it towards her. The hard skin grated, scraping against the coarse flag, and once some obstruction halted it and she lost it. But eventually, inch by slow inch, she drew it within reach until at last she could turn over and seize it properly with her whole hand.

Now, perhaps, with luck, she might be able to do something about escaping, for the crocodile handbag — although Wright had accurately catalogued its contents — was not entirely what it seemed.

Many of the things inside had been endowed at the U.N.C.L.E. laboratories with a double purpose.

But first, should she call Mark?

She felt the reassuring shape of the Communicator in its secret pocket beneath the lining of the bag. No... time was too short. She must get out of here herself and call him afterwards, for if she did summon him to the rescue, he might well be too late to help her by the time he could get there from the town. She drew the bag towards her and rummaged inside.

The cigarette lighter she produced was very slightly larger than standard. It would also cut through various metals if properly handled, being a miniature blowtorch of considerable power...

As she picked up the tiny knob with her nails and began pumping the shaft to which it was attached in order to raise the pressure, she pondered on her best course of action. Obviously she would be unable to use the flame to cut through the wristlet or anklet, so it was a matter of attacking either the chain shackling her to the wall or the padlock securing wrist and ankle...judging by the thickness of the iron, there would not be enough in the reservoir to attempt both.

She reached into the handbag again and drew out what looked like an ordinary hairpin. The light was fast fading, but she would have to do what she could... Twisting the special wire into a convoluted shape, she inserted it into the keyhole of the padlock and attempted a turn. It would not move.

She withdrew it and made a minute adjustment to one end. This time, it began to turn and then apparently fouled on some thing inside. For the second time she took it away and effected an alteration. It turned further but still would not go the whole way. On the third attempt, the wire she was manipulating bent slackly at a corner and then parted, so she had to begin all over again. But with the new piece, she was lucky first time: there was a firm click and the padlock tongue sprang open.

With a gasp of relief, April turned to the lighter again. Now that she had two hands, the task would be that much simpler — especially as she no longer had that agonisingly cramped posture imposed on her. It was, however, going to be no easy job: in the first place, she would be unable to look directly at the fierce flame, so that accuracy would be a hit-and-miss matter. There were specially tinted glasses for use with the blowtorch lighter, but she did not have them with her. Secondly,

the combustible by-products of the oxy-acetylene flame made a pungent and instantly recognisable smell... and she had no idea how far away she was from the main part of the house where Wright and his henchmen had no doubt gathered with the mysterious Colonel Forsett — whoever he was.

Thirdly, the flame — even a tiny one like this — was noisy. And lastly, she had no idea if it would last long enough to cut through the chain.

Feverishly, she took the links between her two hands. It must be cut as near to her foot as possible, for with a clanking length of chain fixed to her ankle, she would be a sitting target. On the other hand, since she could not for long look at what she was doing, there was a very real risk that she would sear through her boot and injure her leg. Eventually she decided on the third link out from the anklet and thumbed the mechanism of the lighter.

A thin tongue of flame shot ten inches into the air with a muted roar. Setting the torch on the floor, she twisted a couple of tiny handkerchiefs around the two links between the area of operations and her boot to insulate them from each other and try to minimise the heat transference. Then, picking up the lighter, she directed the flame at the third link.

In an instant, it seemed to her, the cellar became an inferno of odours and noise. The hiss of the pressurised flame and the rattle of the chain on the stone flags warred for attention in her over-sensitive mind with the acrid, throat-catching tang of the gas, the flat, sour smell of heating metal, and the stench of charred handkerchief and varnished leather.

Averting her eyes from the fierce incandescence which lay at the centre of the shower of sparks, she held the torch grimly in place. The centre of the link was cherry red when she turned off the flame and paused to listen.

In the sudden silence, the assorted smells of the operation seemed stronger than ever. Far away, a motor car engine started, revved up, and then died away into silence. Otherwise there was no sound. Colonel Forsett and his wife, she imagined with an inward smile, had either just arrived or just left. Or perhaps Wright's wife had returned. Or Wright himself had gone. In any case, it was perhaps a good thing, for whichever of those alternatives was true, it was likely that its result would be momentarily to focus attention away from her.

Pumping at the handle, she returned to her task.

Several times, the intense heat transmitted by the links forced her to snatch her foot away; once the agony of looking too closely at the flame caused her to waste a half minute of flame on the stone floor. But finally there was an appreciable opening in the curved iron of the link.

And then the flame dwindled, guttered, and died out.

Desperately, April pumped and pumped; furiously she clicked at the mechanism — but there was no response. The little tank was exhausted.

The girl was almost crying with exasperation. So very near, and yet...She set her teeth and waited for the hot metal to cool. Once it was brittle again, there was a faint chance that she could utilise the gap she had made to force the link apart. Planting her shackled foot at the full stretch of the chain away from the wall, she placed the other at the height of the ring, flexed her knee and began to push.

There was a tiny metallic chink! and she was suddenly pitching over backwards, to land with a jar against the opposite wall. But she was free!

Panting, she leaned against the cold granite and listened. No sound interrupted the laboured breathing exuding from her own lungs. Picking up her handbag, she dropped the lighter inside, twisted the opened padlock out of her wrist iron, and walked across to the window. There was a light metallic tapping from the two links of chain still attached to her anklet, but it was not too bad.

The window opened on an ordinary latch. She swung it outwards, hauled herself up, and climbed into a narrow area.

It was quite dark now, and the wind was moaning softly among the tops of the tall trees which sheltered the house. In the flagged yard above the area, now that she could see all of it, a Humber shooting brake stood outside the barn whose roof she had been looking at from inside her cell. Beyond, light streamed from an open doorway leading into an immense garage, winking from the sophisticated curves delineating the body of a D.S.21 Citroen. The main part of the house bulked against the sky behind her — and she imagined from the suffused radiance outlining the roof that the lighted windows were all on the far side.

For a moment, she toyed with the idea of trying to steal one of the cars — then prudence overrode imagination: Wright had spoken of special devices to stop people trying to escape, and they would be on to her as soon as she pressed the starter. No, the stealthy exit to the cliffs, followed by a run down to Porthallow and a return in force with Mark — that was what was needed now.

In the instant that the thought was formed — and before she had had time to look around and take notice of the lay of the land — a man in chauffeur's uniform walked out of the garage and saw her. His exclamation of surprise was echoed by an angry shout of alarm from the cellar from which she had just escaped.

In a flash, April turned and ran, away from the light, away from the cellar, away from the chauffeur who was tugging a gun from his waistband. Before she had gone three steps, light shafted into the darkness from the cell window, where Wright was climbing out with a torch in his hand.

A shot crashed out behind her and something whizzed into the dark above her head. Water, she thought frantically, I must have water... There was something dripping near the cellar, she remembered: it must have been a tap or a water butt. She clattered to a halt and looked around — yes, there it was! Just behind her. A main risertap with a bucket hooked over it by the handle, against the wall of the house.

"Don't shoot!" she cried. "I give up; I'm coming…"

Slowly, she walked back towards Wright. Beyond him, the chauffeur stood with his pistol cocked, full of suspicion.

"Put up your hands," Wright called. "Walk slowly towards the barn."

In her right hand, April was prising what looked like a life saver from the roll of mints which had been in her bag... but it was a disc that would have frightened the life out of anyone who tried to eat it! As she lifted her arms, she flipped the pellet neatly into the bucket of water and hurled herself to the ground.

The instant that the life-saver touched the surface, a vast outpouring of dense smoke surged from the bucket, rolled across the yard and blotted Wright, the chauffeur, the cars and the garage from sight.

Shots from two different guns thundered as the girl scrambled to her feet and began wildly running away from the life-saving screen.

Wright was bawling something in the dark, a bell had begun ringing, ringing, and in the distance she could hear a woman's voice calling. She hurled herself through an arched doorway in a wall, ran along a brick path and blundered into a shrubbery. She knew she only had a moment before they rounded the house the other way to cut her off.

On the far side of the bushes, she found herself on a lawn. The front of the house, mullioned windows ablaze with light, was off to her right. And away beyond, the night sky was speckled with a rash of red lights warning low-flying aircraft away from the masts of Trewinnock Tor.

She realized she was running in the wrong direction, away from the town.

On an impulse, she dropped to her hands and knees and began crawling back the way she had come, behind a line of standard roses.

A moment later three figures ran round the corner of the house and fanned out across the lawn. "Gerry," a woman called, "I should go towards the South Gate if I were you: she may have a car in the lane."

"Good idea!" Wright's mannered voice replied. "I'll go that way. Mason — you head for the boathouse and cut her off if she goes that way."

"Very good, sir," the man in chauffeur's uniform called back.

Grinning, April rose to her feet at the end of the row and walked softly back through the archway into the yard. Most of the smoke screen had blown away, but there were still layers of it wreathing in the light from the garage.

She tiptoed across the swathe of brilliance and glanced into the building. The place was deserted. As she began hurrying back down the path she had taken with Wright earlier that afternoon, she could hear the voices of the pursuit growing fainter and fainter in the distance behind her. So far, so good, she thought... But the lord of the manor had said that there were two servants besides himself and his wife on the premises. There was still one unaccounted for. And there was still the possibility of trip wires, electric fences and other forms of man-trap before she was off the property... She would have to go carefully, especially as she was now out of range of the diffuse illumination from the house and it really was very dark. Later, there would be a moon, but just now it was positively Stygian!

The mystery of the second servant did not remain long unsolved. As she rounded a spinney at the entrance to a field she saw below her the

stile over which she had entered silhouetted against the pale fury of the sea, giant hands plucked her from the ground as though she had been a baby.

"Ah, now! What have we 'ere?" a deep voice exclaimed. "You'm beant running away without sayin' thank'ee, be en?... Maister'd never hold with that. I think you'd better come over by the house along of me, my pretty one!"

Twisting in the remorseless grip, April saw that the man was gigantic. He must have been fully seven feet high, and he was muscularly built to match. She chopped a karate blow at his neck, twisted again and seized his wrist in a judo grip— but the giant just laughed, hefted her over his shoulder like a roll of bedding, and began striding up the hill towards the house.

All right, the girl thought, if that's the way you want it... Maybe it's better like this!

Her handbag was looped over one wrist by the handles. Under cover of a girlish thrashing about with hands and feet, she manoeuvred yet another article out of it: a small gold lipstick case.

The hypodermic needle shot out at the touch of a catch, and the point was plunged into the vast wrist holding her on the man's shoulder before he had gone another three paces. The barrel was filled with chloral hydrate, and however tough the man was, this particular Mickey Finn would bring him down long before they reached the house.

Her captor grunted with pain, shook his wrist a little, and then clamped the other more firmly still about the small of her back.

April's head bumped five more times against the giant's back as it hung down over his shoulder — and then suddenly he was staggering, mouthing animal cries, lurching into bushes and trees. A moment later he crashed to the ground and lay like a man dead.

The girl rose shakily to her feet, picked up her bag, and retraced her steps. At the stile, she touched the wooden crosspiece with the bag before she dared to put a hand on it — but there was no shower of sparks, no shot from a booby-trap gun, no electrical discharge. Whatever the seaward defences of Sir Gerald Wright's house were, she was through them.

She climbed over and looked down. To one side, a finger of light

probed the boathouse where the chauffeur was searching the cove. Below, breakers snarled in the dark — and round the corner lay the lights of Porthallow.

Then she was in the open, scrambling, running, her hair streaming in the wind, stumbling down the slope towards safety.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

APRIL DANCER stopped three times on her way down to Porthallow to try and contact Mark Slate on the Communicator. Each time she drew a blank: the device's bleeping call- sign remained unanswered. She fell twice in the darkness along the rocky path, and ripped her sheepskin coat on a strand of barbed wire while trying to find a short cut from the cliff to the harbour. By the time she regained the circus field at the top of the town, she was breathless, bedraggled, bleeding from half a dozen minor cuts, and covered in burrs from some bush into which she had stumbled on her way.

The nagging worry she felt at Mark's inexplicable silence was resolved as soon as she had negotiated the noisy crowd thronging the sideshows and gained the comparative quiet of her own caravan. There was an envelope propped up on the table beside the bed, sealed, but with no name and no address on it.

The girl ripped open the flap and drew out the single sheet of paper it contained. He must have been in a hurry, she thought; he had written to her in clear! She read:

Having discovered something rather disquieting about the host of your tea party, I have driven up to see whether I can offer you a lift home. If you read this, of course, my journey will not have been really necessary!... In which case I shall merely make my excuses and leave. Dinner at the Crabber at nine?—M.

With an exclamation of dismay, she crumpled the paper involuntarily into a ball and dropped it to the floor. Foolish, quixotic Mark! After all the trouble she had had in escaping from the THRUSH headquarters, he had himself learned the truth — and dashed in impulsively to rescue her... only far from being able to "make his excuses" and leave, he would find a much warmer welcome than he expected, for the inhabitants of the house up on the moors would know all about him

and be only too glad to lay their hands on him.

And now, instead of coding a message reporting to Waverly in New York and awaiting instructions, she would have to dash out again, back into the lion's mouth (to keep the circus parlance) and do her best to rescue him!

There was just one small problem: how was she going to do it?

Mark had taken his car, she thought as she picked the locks of her anklet and bracelet and stripped them off. Even if she could hire or borrow another, it would take time — and time was precious. Whatever Wright's mission was, he had said it was due to end this evening. On the other hand, to struggle all the way up the cliff path again would take even longer — and to go to the house by the inland road, climbing the moors and skirting the DEWS station, was unthinkable on foot. Besides which, the landward side of the place was certain to be the one most closely guarded. If only she could think of some way to land herself on the inside of the defences, there might be a chance...

Staring blankly out of the window, her eyes fell on the figure of Ernie Bosustow, tramping past on his way from the trailer to the sideshows.

Perhaps that was the answer — he was only a boy, but he loathed Sir Gerald Wright, he knew the area, and he'd plenty of guts and defiance and determination himself... which were not bad qualities for a sidekick, in the circumstances!

And she had to have a sidekick: courageous and resourceful though she was, April felt the need for the moral support of a second person on this adventure, even if that person was going to be only a passenger. She strode to the door and flung it open. "Ernie!" she called. "Can you come here a minute?"

The boy strolled across. "Hallo, hallo," he said with an impish look up at her. "What happened to you? You look as though you'd been dragged through a hedge backwards!"

"That's just exactly what did happen to me," April said grimly. "I want to get my own back on the people responsible, and I wondered... Look. Can you come in for a moment?"

He nodded, ran across to the steps leading to the caravan door, and swung himself up. "What's on your mind, then?" he asked.

"Ernie, I need help. I can't go into details but... you were right about Sir Gerald Wright. Not only that: he appears to be tied in with the other thing, the secret thing we're investigating — which is probably why he killed your girlfriend... not because she was embarrassing him with his wife but because she knew too much of his affairs. The point is, Sir Gerald and his people have probably captured Mr. Slate. He went up there to the house, not knowing they realised who he was... and I have to get him out. Will you help me?"

"Right about Wright, eh? That's a bit of a right about turn for a lad as everybody suspects of murder, isn't it?" chuckled the youngest Bosustow.

"Oh, Ernie — don't hold the police attitude against Mr. Slate and me," she implored.

"Don't worry: I'll help you all right. If it's to avenge Sheila, like — and especially if it does that toffee-nosed bastard in the eye — I'm on! But what d'you want me to do?"

"If they have Mr. Slate... and I'm afraid they must have by now... then they're holding him in Wright's house, beyond the radar station up on the moor. My problem is to get inside the grounds without crossing the boundaries in any of the usual ways: they have electrified fences and men with guns and so on." The girl stared at the table for a moment, absently stooped down to pick up the crumpled note from Mark, and struck a match which she held to one corner of it. "You know this region well, don't you?" she asked.

Ernie grinned. "Bet your life. I was at school here — though the family originally comes from further north. But the old man's always said Porthallow was his real home: that's why he winters here every year."

"Well, can you think of any way we could get in there undetected?"

"Hire a helicopter from Goonhilly?"

"I could even arrange that, as it happens. But it'd take too long."

"Of course," the boy said slowly, "there's always the Keg-'ole."

"The what?"

"The Keg-Hole. Natural curiosity, they call it. It's kind of a cave where the sea runs into the cliffs below the old coastguard station — but inside the cave it suddenly opens out and there's the sky above you

again. From the landward side, it's like a hole in the ground where you can see the sea at the bottom."

"Why is it called the Keg-Hole?"

"From the shape, first of all. And then again, smugglers used to run kegs of brandy ashore from the French boats there. You can tie up inside and heft the stuff up a path cut in the rock, and nobody sees you until you're up on the cliffs beyond. There's a regular rabbit-warren up there!"

"What — smuggling just by a coastguard station?"

"Ah, you got it the wrong way round — the coastguard station was built in that particular spot because it was used for smuggling! Once the preventive men had their look-out there, the smugglers had to find somewhere else."

"Did I understand you to say that you could take a boat in the cave?"

"Hell, yes — you could get a crabber in there on a calm day."

"What about a rough day — a day like today?"

"Too dicey — but you could run in a twelve- or fourteen-footer, easy. We often used to when we were kids."

"You could get one in now, in the dark?"

"Sure you could, if you knew the cliffs."

"Could *you*, though?" she persisted.

"Me? Well, that's a different matter!... Still an' all — I don't know. Why not, for goodness sake? I could try."

The piece of paper had burned steadily down until it reached the tiny triangle held up between April's finger and thumb. She pursed her lips and blew once sharply to extinguish the flame, then lowered the crisp ash and ground it to fragments in a saucer. "Could you, Ernie?" she said softly. "And would you... to help me?"

"Sure I would. Why not?"

"The weather's not too bad tonight, is it?"

"No, I guess not. Wind's dropped quite a bit, but there's a hell of a sea

still running, of course. It won't be easy."

"Where did you say we came up? — if we took the path, I mean?"

"Just below the old coastguard station. You can't see it from the path, you think the cliff falls dead away — but in fact there's this dirty great shelf sticking out thirty or forty feet below, and the Hole's in that."

"But that… but that's... Ernie, that's no good! We want something that takes us into the Wright property! This way, we'd have all that trouble and still find ourselves outside the stile. We might as well walk up the path!"

"Ah — but I said the hole came out on the shelf. O didn't say we do."

"What do you mean?"

"Half way up the Keg, the stairway stops at a platform — and there's a passage from the platform cut into the rock."

"A tunnel! Where does it come out?"

"Practically where you want! There's dozens of branches — one of 'em goes right under the Tor and leads to an underground storeroom slap under the radar station! — we used to play in it when we was kids."

"But, Ernie — why don't we simply walk along the cliffs to this hole and climb down the stairway to the platform, and get in to the tunnels that way?"

The boy smiled. "You don't know the nineteenth-century coastguards," he said. "Efficiency at the expense of imagination. They dynamited the stairs between the platform and the lip. You can only get to the tunnels from the sea."

"But that would surely mean... No matter! It suits us. Let's go!"

Snatching up the handbag, she held open the door for him to leave, and then ran lightly down the steps, slamming it, shut behind her.

Forever in her mind, the next half hour was a kaleidoscope of movement and of colour. There was the push and jostle through the Saturday night crowd, laughing, shouting, screaming, their open-mouth faces lit harshly from the flares of the booths; the sickly warm smell of candyfloss, nutty fumes from the roast chestnut stall — and over all the strident wheeze of a hurdy-gurdy... And then they were

away and running down the hill, past the thatched cottages in the lamplight, under the bridge and into the square, now filled with the headlamps of cars backing and filling to find a place because there was a film showing at the mission halt. Beyond the women in winter coats queuing for the doors to open, they were in a huddle of narrow lanes pricked out with lighted windows or the flickering green of family television... and then at last, salty in the nostrils, there was the cold push of the wind on their faces as they came out on to the quayside.

Ernie took her arm and guided her along the Hard, past rows of gunwales straining at ropes creaking to the swell. They edged beyond a stack of crab-pots pungent with tar and rotting bait and trod along a boardwalk leading out, rising and falling with the moored dinghies to which it was tethered, to the middle of the harbour.

At the end of the planking, he jumped down into a bright green boat with a high bow and stern post and threw the tarpaulin from the engine housing amidships. The craft was about fifteen feet long, April judged, and wide in the beam. There was a curved half-deck which ended just forward of the engine housing, and the bulkhead blanking off the fore- part which this covered held wheel, compass and other controls on one side, and a small door leading to the sail locker on the other. The stern half of the boat was open.

"She's a funny old craft," the boy called up to her. "Originally they built her for a miniature whaler — as an experiment, like — but she was too small. Then she hung about for years, just a hulk for kids to play in. Then Harry, my brother Harry, he got this two hundred horsepower diesel cheap — and he put the two together, and there she is."

"No sail?" April asked.

"No — just the engine. She doesn't even have a mast, that I know of. But she's a sprightly old tub, for all that. Do a good eighteen to twenty knots if pushed! And she's real tough. That's why we're using her instead of borrowing one of me mates' more modern craft."

The girl jumped down into the cockpit. There were a couple of thwarts and a narrow bench which ran around the stern. Apart from these and a pair of oars lying along the duckboards, it was empty.

As Ernie bent down and grasped the handle which turned the heavy flywheel, she looked back at the quayside. Masts, rigging and

crosstrees tossed against the illumination of the streetlamps lining the Hard. The moon was up, silvering the shallow slate roofs, mellowing the thatch — and if she turned the other way, she could see the agitated water just outside the harbour mouth in its shining path.

It certainly promised to be very rough. Even at its moorings, the boat was lifting and falling sickeningly. And as soon as the engine caught and settled down to the characteristic diesel knock, and the boy shoved them off and into the middle of the port, she realised how small it really was.

The rollers were marching in between the piers at fairly long intervals — she could hear the continuation of them thundering on the beach at one side of the harbour — and it was not until they were well clear of the warning lights on each break water that they really hit the swell. The old boat lifted its blunt nose to the crest of every wave, hung suspended for a moment, and then crashed down into the trough with a thwack that sent the spray flying and jarred April's teeth in her head. And then the boards were pressing the soles of her feet again as they rose like a lift to the next one.

As soon as they drew out from the shelter of the headland, the full fury of the weather seized them. April was looking out over the stern at the lights of Porthallow, clustered like fruit along the dark branch of the valley, when suddenly they slid away and out of sight and the whaler was dropping endlessly into an abyss.

The girl swung round and gasped with amazement at the wall of moonlit water rearing over them. At the instant that it threatened to engulf them, the boat slewed, and then seemed to climb almost vertically up the slope. The vicious, curling tip of the comber hissed past, only inches below the gunwale, and then on the downward tilt, the wind snatched her breath, whistling in her ears and howling across the foam-flecked surface of the water to flick tongues of spume from the waves. "I thought you said the weather had calmed down!" she shouted, flinging herself forward and cowering down in the shelter of the bulk head beside the boy.

He was hunched over the wheel, his wet eyes bright in the moonlight, anticipating every movement with small motions of the spokes, tiny variations in the opening of the throttle. There was a smile on his lips.

This, April saw at once as she repeated her comment, was a young man doing what he wanted to do: pitting his skills against the elements.

He turned and grinned at her. "I said the wind had dropped. But I warned you there was a sea running, mind," he yelled back.

"There still seems plenty of wind to me!"

"Oh, come now — she's not a point over Force Six! These seas are about eighteen foot, trough to crest. It's when they're shorter that you're in trouble: front half liftin' before your stern's down, and you break your back as soon as whistle!"

The bows corkscrewed through a crest crumbling into foam, hung giddily over space, and then roared down into a trough, to thunder against the swell of the next wave with a shock that sent showers of icy spray exploding into the air. Drenched to the skin, the girl pushed the soaking hair from her eyes and screamed against the wind: "Do you think you can make it to your cave in this kind of weather, Ernie?"

"Sure I can. We have to head out a bit because of the reefs inshore this side of the point. But there's slack water off Tregunda, and it runs powerful deep just there, which is why the old smugglers used it. It's when you get big seas on a shallow ground that it's dangerous... like the Manacles, off Coverack. That's beyond the headland on the far side of the cove: you can see the flashing light as we rise.... There! See! They've had more wrecks there than the rest of the coast put together."

"Okay, Ernie. You're the skipper. if you think you can — Good grief! Look at that!"

A mountainous wave rose at them crosswise, canting the boat alarmingly on her beam. At the same time another breaker speeding diagonally across its face burst with a noise like a thunderclap over the stern, cascading a torrent of sea water into the cockpit. April picked herself up groggily from the duckboards, to hear Ernie shouting: "Bail, woman! bail for your life! Get that water out or we're done for next time we hit a sea like that!"

"What... with? What shall I bail with?" she screamed against the howling of the wind.

Ernie Bosustow was wrestling with the wheel, steering the bucking whaler up and down the gigantic seas like a man on a roller-coaster. "...old petrol tin... stern thwart... fast as you..." she heard him shout.

She found a two-gallon can with the top sawn off under the rear seat,

and began frenziedly dipping and throwing, dipping and throwing, as they ploughed on into the gale. The next half hour was sheer nightmare. As soon as they were far enough out to clear the reefs, they had to circle round and run back before the wind, with the great combers, marbled grey and gold by the moon, sweeping past on either side. The whaler, squatting low in the water now that she was half awash, alternately buried her nose and her stern in the crests as the twin screws — now labouring, now racing as they lifted clear of the sea — slogged remorselessly on. Many times, as they sank endlessly into some trough, she was sure they would never rise again; many times, as the boat shuddered to the onslaught of an extra large wave, she was certain it would disintegrate.

But at last she realised that the buffeting had resolved itself into a simple — if extensive — up and down motion; the shriek of the wind had died down to a whistle. She looked up from her back-breaking task. They were quite close in under the cliffs — she could make out their dark outline against the sky. Distantly to either side, she could hear the thunder of surf. She could even make out the pulsing line of phosphorescence where the rollers dashed themselves against the rocks. But straight ahead, in the freak area of slack water the boy had told her about, the sea simply rose and fell, sucking at the strata.

She continued to bail. The boat was now riding lighter in the water, but there was still a good deal aboard.

A moment later, aware of some subtle variation in the atmosphere around them, she straightened as they were carried swiftly forward, relapsed, and then surged on again, apparently straight at the cliff. There was a sudden acceleration, a pouring down of darkness as the moon and stars were extinguished — and then a slow spreading of unearthly green light as they floated out into the middle of an enormous cavern. The whaler had pierced the cliff to reach the Keg-Hole!

Ernie shouted something triumphant but unintelligible — she could not hear what it was because the first syllable he uttered was caught up to echo a hundredfold in the vast chimney of rock above them, distorted and magnified as it crashed around the galleries of dripping stone to merge with the suck and slap and drip of the water and the muffled roaring of the wind above.

There were no waves in the cavern, but the boat rose and fell sickeningly as the water ebbed and flowed — there must be an amplitude of eight or nine feet, April thought, as she peered at a

weed-slimed ledge which kept sinking into view as the craft reached the zenith of its climb.

The boy scrambled up on to the covered bow and shouted something again. She saw he was going to try and jump on to the ledge. Three times he fended the boat off, leaning desperately against the slippery rock as it slithered past his hands. On the fourth rise, he launched himself at the side of the cavern, cleared the lip of the shelf and landed on his hands and knees. The next time the boat rose, he was on his feet, beckoning April to follow.

The thrust from Ernie's feet as he jumped had pushed the whaler away from the wall and she had to wait several ups and downs before it had drifted near enough for her to try. Then on the next rise some subterranean current tugged the stern outwards and the bows crunched against the side, jarring the craft from end to end and casting April to the curved decking. As the sea fell away and the boat dropped once more, the gun wale dragged down the face of the rock with a splintering of timber and three of the ropes tethering padded fenders to her sides parted. Yet again the weathered planking smashed into the rock as the ledge sank into the girl's line of vision. With raw and scraped hands, she attempted to keep them apart, but the old boat was too heavy and the swell inexorably nudged her against the wall of the cave. Somewhere up in the bows she could hear water pouring into the sail-locker, swelling the load that swilled ceaselessly from side to side of the cockpit.

The boy was crouched in the dim light on the edge of the shelf, waiting for her with outstretched hands. On the next rise, she gathered herself as the shattered bows lurched up and jumped.

Ernie seized her wrists and threw himself backwards, pulling her down on top of him just as her boot was slipping on the slimy weed.

Panting, she clambered to her feet and looked around her. The cavern was immense; she couldn't estimate how far across. Forty or fifty feet above their heads, the rock strata closed in, narrowing the roof to a shaft, at the top of which, improbably, the moon rode in a patch of sky. And it was the moonlight, reflected and refracted from scores of pale out crops and veins and galleries in this dark chimney, which pierced the gloom with a thousand glittering points of light and flooded the surface of the water with its strange radiance.

"Come on, then," Ernie Bosustow was whispering in her ear. "Let's get up them stairs! You got that flashlight?"

April produced the powerful torch she had snatched from the table before they left the caravan and handed it over. "What about the boat?" she asked. "And why do we have to whisper?"

"Because sound carries like mad in here and we don't know where your friends may be. Because, anyway, if we talk naturally, the echo smashes up and swells the noise so much that you can't understand a ruddy word... and as for the boat…" She saw him shrugging. "... There's nothing to be done."

"But what did you do when you came here as kids? What did the smugglers do?"

"Went back through the tunnel and stood off until someone signalled it was time to come in again. Or, if it was very calm, left two or three in the craft to fend off. Only other thing is to drop a sea anchor and leave her in the middle — and we don't have one aboard."

"How deep is the water in here?"

"They do say eighty fathoms — but nobody's ever really found out."

"Don't you mind about the boat? I mean…"

The boy shrugged again. "She was Harry's boat. Using her to pay off his killers seems... well... right, And if she dies in the attempt — well, again, that's better'n any other way." He switched on the flashlight.

Lancing the gloom, the beam illuminated a circle of dark rock, dripping with bright green weed. As he jerked it sideways, the shaft lit up a narrow flight of stairs carved into the wall of the cave and spiralling upwards towards the chimney and the patch of sky above. They began to climb.

As they rose, the torchlight moving around the walls of the cave picked out the sparkling veins of quartz and felspar and other minerals which writhed through the rock to make the pale and glittering contrasts they had observed from below.

They had climbed perhaps forty feet, and the steps carved in the rock were no longer wet and slippery, when the hoarse booming of the swell lapping the basin below — which sounded oddly like the respiration of some great subterranean beast — was interrupted by a splintering crunch which echoed around the shaft for what seemed like minutes.

"The boat!" April gasped. "Look!"

On the heaving surface of the water, green in the green luminescence of the cavern, they saw the whaler being lifted and smashed against a spur of rock on the far side from the shelf where they had landed. As the water subsided, the boat half caught on the projection, hung crazily for a moment, and then plunged back into the swell with a splash, its reverberations hurting their ears. For a second longer, it remained on the surface — and then gently it tilted up on its bows and slid beneath, leaving only a single plank eddying on the pale water...

Now they had to get out through the passageways above: their only avenue of retreat had gone!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MISS DANCER DOES THE TRICK!

ERNIE Bosustow stopped and mopped his brow. He was panting with exertion. "I think... we'll stop here... few minutes… get my... bearings," he gasped, flopping to the ground. The torchlight showed them a widening in the tunnel almost extensive enough to be called a cave. On the far side, it branched off in three different directions — and it was floored, unbelievably, with sand.

April lowered herself beside him. Since they had watched the whaler sink, they had climbed an interminable number of stairs, negotiated a slippery platform set at a dizzying height above the underground pool, and hurried along what seemed to her to be miles of corridors carved into the rock. They had originally been made, centuries before, as exploratory workings for a projected tin mine, the boy told her, "before they found there wasn't any, this side of the Penwith peninsula!" And the smugglers of a later day had merely made use of what was already there.

"The thing is," Ernie said, levering himself to his feet again, "I can't remember all the ramifications by heart — 'tis too complicated. But there should ought to be like a map here somewhere. We used to copy her down each time we come, so's we didn't get lost, see."

For a few moments he flashed the torch around — and then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he loped across to the corner of one of the tunnels. Carved into the glistening rock, the striations filled in with

some yellowish-white cement, there was a complicated diagram which looked something like an underground railway map of London. Clamping his tongue between his teeth, the boy produced a pencil and a scrap of paper and began to copy down part of the map.

While she was waiting, the girl took from her bag what looked like a flesh-coloured ear plug. She pressed a minute button on the end and then inserted it into her right ear. There was about her wrist a gold charm bracelet hung with many miniatures wrought into the shapes of elephants, cameras, tennis racquets, veteran cars and bicycles — a common enough piece of costume jewellery... except that in April's case every charm was a tiny transistorized microphone, a "bug", and the "ear plug" was the complementary receiver on which she could hear anything the bug transmitted. Before succumbing to her drugged sherry in Wright's sitting room, she had managed unseen to detach one of the charms and secrete it among the foliage of a pot of azalea. She might as well — since she felt exactly like Alice down here anyway! — improve the shining hour and listen in.

As soon as she had pressed home the plug, she sat bolt up right with an exclamation of delight. The receiver had a client! A transmission was coming in loud and clear!

Wright was talking to his wife. They appeared to be in the middle of an argument.

"... understand why you had to go and kill the wretched girl anyway," she said, "especially in so theatrical a way. What was the point?"

"Tidiness, in answer to the first question. Once I discovered she was working part-time for Waverly, was in fact a double agent, I had no alternative. You don't split allegiances with THRUSH."

"Couldn't you have kept her on, made sure she got nothing valuable from us, and milked her to gain more of their secrets?"

"They don't give 'secrets' to part-timers. But you miss the whole point, Diana: as I've said before, the fact that she knew we were THRUSH was enough to sign her death warrant. Surely that's obvious!"

"I suppose so. And the man, Bosustow?"

"A wretched, rash, intruding fool, to quote the Bard. So it had to be — to quote him again — farewell. You know the little rat made his money out of a particularly slimy line in black mail?"

"I know he had pictures of you with your doxy and tried to cash in on them, thinking an upright pillar of local society like yourself would pay anything rather than have his wife know about the affair!" There was a hint of mocking laughter in the clipped, strangulated voice.

"He didn't understand sophisticated people." Wright dismissed the point impatiently. "The point is — once he realised I didn't mind... that you knew already and you didn't mind — then he was too much of a danger to live. Those very facts made us 'different'... and once local people know you are different, they start to poke and pry... We couldn't afford that."

"Even so, Gerry, I don't —"

"Look. What do they say in the latest Council Directive — the one with the computer analogy? When you have an input channel with one component weaker than the others — rip out the whole circuit and rewire from scratch."

"You haven't explained, still, the coconut-shy and the drowning —"

"Oh, heavens!" Wright interrupted. "I should have thought that was clear enough: to throw suspicion on that tomfool yokel the girl was supposed to be engaged to, in the first place; again for tidiness in the second. Mason lured him aboard our cutter by saying he'd discovered a love nest in a cove just beyond Coverack where half the V.I.P.s for the West Country took their secretaries for weekends! Of course the little worm reached for his camera and his flashgun and came running! So far as the coconut-shy goes, I'd hit the girl with my binoculars and I had to mask the wound in case they could have been traced from it."

There was a confused noise in the tiny receiver, ending in the clink of glass on glass. April realised that the table on which the bowl of azalea was resting had been moved and that someone was now pouring out drinks on it.

Wright was saying something, but his words were lost in the glugging of liquid, monstrously distorted by the proximity of the glass to the microphone. Then came the voice of the chauffeur, Mason: "Boat's ready on the slip, sir, and the sub will be standing off at eleven sharp to receive us."

"Right, Mason," the self-satisfied voice drawled. "And what about our impetuous young friend? Is he a little more subdued now?"

The chauffeur gave a vicious chuckle. "You could say that, sir. Jacko gave him a bit of a going over... We had to — Hah! — wipe the Slate clean afterwards, if you know what I mean! "Again he uttered the short, sharp bark of laughter.

April stiffened. Her worst fears were realised. They had got Mark — although at least it sounded as though he was still alive. But Jacko must be the giant she had injected with the knock out drops that afternoon: she shuddered to think what a "going over" from him might imply.

"He's secure, is he, Mason?" the woman was asking.

"Yes, madam. As secure as it's humanly possible to be."

"Really?" She sounded mildly amused. "And how secure is that?"

"Well, the chair he's sitting on is cemented to the rock floor, for one thing. That'll be dry now, and I'll defy anyone to move *that*!"

"You could saw through the legs above the cement."

"Not this one: it's wrought iron!"

"Oh. Oh, that was thoughtful of you, I must say. And how is he attached to it?"

"By wire, madam."

"Wire?"

"Yes, madam. Not the thin fuse-wire type. A determined man can snap that if he's strong enough and courageous enough to stand the pain. No — this is the thicker kind, the sort they use to bind fencing to its posts, or to tie up shrubs and small trees, and to do up crates. With that —"

"But surely it's not bendy enough to tie knots in?"

"No, it isn't. You don't tie knots: you twist it. You get a man tied to something with that wire looped around his ankles and knees and wrists, and the ends of each loop twisted automatically by a packager — just tight enough to sink into the skin — nothing on earth will free that man except by slowly and patiently untwisting the wire! With a crate, you can slip a screwdriver or a wrench between the wire and the wood — and she'll snap. But you can't do that with flesh: it's not

hard enough. No more can you get a pair of wire-cutters between the bonds and the skin, if it bites in enough."

"In other words," Wright butted in, "when the victim is thus wired to an iron chair concreted into the floor, even if rescuers arrive they can't take him away with them — not even complete with chair — until they've got a pair of pliers and untwisted the lot... Thank you, Mason. You've done well."

"All this is very ingenious, Gerry," the woman said dubiously. "But in aid of exactly what?"

"It all ties in with the little device we took off Slate," her husband replied. "And with my not unusable talent for mimicry. You were cross about the girl escaping; this will not only bring her back: it will effectively dispose both of her and of her partner — and by her own hand, too." He laughed pleasantly. "Another Martini, my dear?"

The hairs on the nape of April's neck were pricking. What devilry could this mean? How was she to be brought back to the thatched house on the moors and made to kill both herself and the helpless Mark Slate?

"When the big mast goes," the man was saying over the noise of ice in glasses, "it should fall — if our little Satrap in the station has done its homework — diagonally across the control bunker and put the whole place out of action for weeks!"

"And the charge in the chamber where Slate is...?"

"Lies directly under that mast. It's all very neat. As soon as I have called her, I shall set the hour glass in the chamber. The charge will go up when she opens the door — or when the sand has run out of the glass — whichever happens first. By which time, we shall be on the high seas with our final batch of photos, nice and safe and out of harm's way!"

In the cave below the cliffs, April Dancer shivered as she heard this plot unfold. But the maddening thing was — although she had managed to eavesdrop on the whole plan, it still meant little to her; she couldn't act.

"Now, I'll show you exactly what I mean..." Sir Gerald was saying, when suddenly the girl totally lost interest in what it was that he was about to demonstrate.

The Communicator in her handbag was bleeping!

Feverishly, she groped for the pen-shaped device and thumbed the switch. "Channel open," she called huskily.

"April, sweetie — they got me!" Mark Slate's voice came strongly from the instrument. "Look, I've got to talk fast. I may have to pull out at any moment if someone comes... I'm held prisoner in an old smuggler's hide-out — an underground cave in the rock below the radar station. Here's how you find the entrance..."

The girl listened dully. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong indeed.

And then suddenly she had it: the voice! It was coming at her twice: she could hear Slate's voice not only from the Communicator *but also through the transistorized receiver in her ear...*

In other words, it wasn't Mark's voice at all, but Wright's! This was the "talent for mimicry" of which he had spoken... and it was a talent, too! She might easily have been fooled if she hadn't known of the deception.

The voice completed the directions and broke off. "Quick! I must go off the air now," it said. "Did you get that? Can you make it? Where are you — in the caravan?"

"Yes... yes, in the caravan," the girl replied mechanically, her mind racing. "Hold on, Mark: I'll be there. I'll be there as soon as I can…"

The Communicator went dead, but Wright's chuckle continued in her ear. "Right, my dear," he said. "I'm off to the chamber with the hour-glass."

April looked up to meet the astonished gaze of Ernie Bosustow. "It's all right, Ernie," she said. "I haven't gone mad and started talking to myself! This little thing is a two way radio. Mr. Slate and I use them for talking to one another when we are apart. Wright has just tried to decoy me into coming to the house by pretending to *be* Mr. Slate."

"They have captured him, then?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they have. From what I've just heard — I left a bug in their living room, and I can hear what it transmits on this little ear plug, see? — From what I've just heard, it seems that Wright and his wife have been spying on the secret station at Trewinnock Tor, taking

photographs from their house, collecting secret information from accomplices inside, and picking up gossip from everyone they meet at all the military messes they visit."

"Cor! "Ernie said. "Who for — the Russians?"

"No, Ernie, not the Russians. An organisation much more effective than the secret service of Russia, America or even China; an organisation called THRUSH."

"THRUSH? I never heard of it."

"You wouldn't have. But it's there nonetheless. A world wide syndicate of evil men with unlimited money; a collection of rogue scientists, bankers, industrialists and politicians whose aim is to rule the world. The secrets of Trewinnock Tor are small beer to them — but it all adds up... They have been receiving all the information that Wright collected on micro film — either direct negatives or photographed documents and so on. And the film was collected by couriers who called at Sheila's booth in the circus. When they asked for a certain thing —"

"What thing? What did they ask for?"

"A black Porphyry pixie, as a matter of fact."

"A black Porphyry pixie! So that's why you asked... but, like I said, there are none. You couldn't make 'em."

"Exactly. That was to prevent the film being given to some chance customer by mistake. Sheila didn't know who the couriers were, you see, and nobody is going to ask for a souvenir *that doesn't exist* by coincidence, are they?... Anyone who did enquire about a pixie in Porphyry had to be the courier. And then they were given a *lighthouse* in Porphyry — with a secret compartment in which the film was concealed."

"Now it's lighthouses!" he cried, astonished. "Who made 'em, then? I didn't."

"I know you didn't. I think we'll find one of Wright's henchmen worked in stone; there's probably a wheel some where in the house or the outbuildings."

"Did... did Sheila know... about the films, I mean? She was in on it?"

"I'm afraid she must have been," April said gently.

The boy kicked savagely at the sand. "It was him!" he cried. "He talked her in to it! It's his fault!"

"Well, let's get on and get at him. Does that map..." She paused.

"What is it?" Bosustow asked.

"I thought I heard voices — a long way away, but quite clear. Could I have done?"

"Not here, not in this cave. 'Tis too far. Only place you could have heard voices from would have been the Keg-'ole itself — and I didn't notice too many sunbathers in there tonight!"

"Oh, well... never mind. I was saying: Wright thinks I'm in my caravan. He won't expect me to arrive for sometime. But if we could suddenly appear before they expected us, we could take them by surprise... and we'd have a much better chance of overcoming them. Then we could try and rescue Mr. Slate."

"Where've they got him, then?"

"Apparently he's in a cave — some kind of storeroom used by the smugglers, I gather — right under the masts of the Tor. And they're... they're going to fix some explosive booby trap that goes off as soon as the door is opened — or when the sand runs out of an hour glass, whichever happens first. So when we rescue Mr. Slate, the idea is, we blow up ourselves, him, and the station

"That must be the old commissary that the freebooters used! There is a way down from the middle of a thicket just behind Wright's stables..."

"Is there a way that would bring us out inside Wright's grounds from here, though? That's the point now."

"Sure there is. Don't you want to try and get Mr. Slate out first?"

April sighed. "The assignment comes first," she said miserably. "We have to stop THRUSH, and that means nailing people like Wright. If we go for Mr. Slate first, we may be too late: the Wrights are being taken off in a submarine."

"But it may take time to get them. We might not make it. We may be too late for Mr. Slate..."

"Just show me the way, Ernie," the girl said harshly, "and leave the decisions to me."

Twenty minutes later, the boy was heaving at a square stone set in the ceiling of the passageway. They had zigzagged endlessly from tunnel to tunnel, with frequent references to Ernie's rough map, and at last they had hit a wider gallery in the rock which he recognised. In the fading light from the torch, he hurried to the end of a short cul-de-sac and began to search the rough-hewn ceiling for the trapdoor.

"Here we are then," he exclaimed triumphantly, "it's still here okay! Comes out in the middle of a ruined chapel, so we needn't worry about noise. When this place was the manor house..." He began to push at the stone slab.

The passageway was just short of six feet high, so that he had plenty of leverage. When April joined him, there was a shower of dust from the crevice all around the stone and it moved slightly. A moment later, the trapdoor lifted at one end...and then it was up and over with a crash that seemed to split the night and they were hauling themselves painfully up into the open air.

Through a wood and across a small field was the house. They could see through the lighted French windows the burnished hair of the woman who was crouched in front of the huge Devon grate tending a fire of papers, which she fed from time to time with documents from a suitcase open on the floor beside her. Wright himself, his silver hair as immaculate as ever, came in through the doorway, beyond which they could see stairs curving up in a gracious sweep. He was carrying two lightweight valises.

April sank down behind an ornamental shrub on the lawn, motioning the boy to keep out of sight behind her. Cautiously, she parted the spiky branches and peered through.

Instantly a bell started ringing wildly and the lawn was flooded with the livid glare of a dozen spotlights. For one frozen moment, she saw the THRUSH man arrested in mid-step, his mouth open in surprise, and then he had dropped the valises and leapt for the doorway to plunge the room into darkness. Obviously she had unwittingly touched off one of the alarms with which the place was ringed.

Footsteps clattered round the corner of the house from the stable yard. Mason appeared with a shotgun in his hands and stood at the edge of the lawn, squinting suspiciously out into the floodlit area. A shout

from behind a hedge on the far side of the facade testified that Jacko, too, was out in defence of his master's domain... and then the voice of Wright himself was calling (April thought from an unlit upper window): "Out there, you fools! On the lawn, behind that bush at the side of the lily pond... There's just the girl and a man, as far as I can see. Get in there and get them!"

The girl had been unwrapping another of the smoke- producing pastilles from the packet in her bag. Now, before Mason or Jacko could start shooting, she lobbed it into the lily pond. As soon as the smoke boiled up, she screamed, "*Run, Ernie! Run!*" as loud as she could — and held Bosustow's arm in steely fingers to make sure that he stayed exactly where he was. A fusillade of shots rang out as the impenetrable screen mushroomed up and then streamed across the lawn before the wind. Wright, firing now from upstairs, and Jacko, using some heavy calibre revolver, were raking the blanked off area in the belief that they were stealing across the lawn behind the cover of the smoke. Mason was advancing cautiously towards it across the stretch of grass that was still visible, his more cumbersome weapon held in reserve.

April waited until he was some way past them, facing the billowing black cloud. Then, motioning the boy to stay where he was, she stole out from behind the bush on tiptoe and silently approached behind the chauffeur. When she was immediately behind him, she called clearly, "*No! Back this way, Ernie*," and threw herself to the grass.

In the instant that Mason swung the shotgun round towards her, there was a blast of fire from the far side of the smoke screen — four shots in quick succession from Jacko's revolver and two coughing reports from the direction of the house that sounded ominously like an express rifle.

Had she in fact been where she had led them to believe, April would have stood little chance of escape. The chauffeur was hurled a yard backwards by the impact of several bullets, dropped the shotgun, spun round with upraised arms and then crashed to the ground. He twitched once and then lay still.

"One," whispered April as she wormed her way back be hind the bush to the boy. "Grab that 12-bore and follow me..."

They circled the illuminated lawn, crunching their way through an herbaceous border loud with dead leaves. There had been no sound from beyond the screen since the shots... And then suddenly the

woman's voice: "You imbeciles! You've been tricked into shooting Mason... and now they have his gun.

"Good!" the girl breathed. "That means she's out in the garden too. Now, *we're* going to go indoors and see what surprises we can work there!"

She flattened herself against a wall laced with peach trees as the huge bulk of Jacko pounded across the gap at the far end of a short avenue of yew bushes. From the far side of the terrace, high heels tapped in the other direction.

April and the boy stole down the avenue, skirted a summer house, and found themselves outside the French windows. The house was in complete darkness. In the blaze of light which centred on the lily pond, the last vestiges of smoke wreathed about the inert figure of the dead chauffeur. Jacko and the woman were somewhere near the garage: they could hear their voices over the roof.

With infinite care, the girl pressed the latch on the nearest door. It sank down silently and the French window swung open. Inside, there was warm air and a hint of tobacco smoke, the lingering fragrance of a cigar — a domestic scent distorted by the harsh tang of charred papers in the grate. Through the drawing room, wide doors gave on to a darkened hallway. a chequerboard of moonlight was admitted through a leaded window near the front door, and against the subdued luminance of stained glass they could make out the silhouette of banisters slanting up towards the first floor. Somewhere a clock ticked slowly.

Catching the boy by the hand, April edged towards the stairs. Abruptly the hall was blazed with light and, from behind and above them, Wright's supercilious voice drawled:

"Stay exactly where you are. This is a Mannlicher — I don't need to remind you of its muzzle velocity. It reloads very fast: I could drill the two of you before you'd moved two steps. Jacko! Come here... indoors... I've got a job for you

There was an answering cry from the terrace. There followed the thunder of heavy feet in the drawing room — and suddenly the whole place, it seemed to April, was full of people. Dark figures materialised from the foyer, the kitchen quarters, the cloakroom, even the upstairs passages, and in an instant the house resounded to the noise of hand to hand combat!

The intruders, she saw with stupefaction, were all policemen, led by the redoubtable Superintendent Curnow.

Jacko's giant figure was immersed in a flood of uniforms and, on the landing above, Wright struggled with two men who were trying to take the rifle from him. With six hands on the stock, the barrel sawed this way and that until finally there was a sharp explosion and a shower of plaster plummeted down from the ceiling on to the policemen battling in the hall below. At the same time, Wright and his adversaries, taken by surprise by the shot, lurched against the elegant eighteenth-century balustrading guarding the gallery and crashed through it. There was a splintering crunch, and a thump which shook the timbers of the old house as the three men landed. One of the policemen was knocked cold by the impact. As the other staggered groggily to his feet, Wright leaped for the wall and grabbed for one of a pair of crossed sabres displayed over the stone fireplace.

The THRUSH man whirled, murder in his glaring eyes — and that was when Ernie Bosustow acted. Darting in under the gleaming blade, he dropped the shotgun, hacked viciously at Wright's shin, planted a useful left in the pit of the baronet's stomach as he jerked up a leg in involuntary agony, and then locked his fingers together and brought down his doubled hands on the man's neck as he doubled up, retching for breath. The next moment, Curnow and a tall constable were snapping the handcuffs on his wrists.

Jacko rose from the mêlée by the drawing room door like a balloon dragging at its moorings. With a roar of rage, he fought free of all his attackers. He picked up a beefy sergeant, lifted the heavy policeman above his head and pitched him bodily at the others. As they fell in a tangled heap to the ground, he shook his great head — and found himself face to face with April.

The girl didn't hesitate. Drawing back her right arm as far as it would go, she hit him — a long, looping, roundhouse blow that came up from the floor and buried itself with all her weight behind it in his solar plexus.

The giant stared at her unbelievingly, the breath whooping from his savaged diaphragm. Slowly he folded up — and then the police were on him again. And this time they had his hands behind his back and the handcuffs locked before he could draw one agonised breath.

"All right then," Curnow panted, straightening his tie and glaring at Wright. "Let's get the formalities over with, for a start. I must—"

"No, no." It was April who interrupted. "Mark — he's got Mark tied up in some cave with a booby trap bomb designed to blow up the station on the Tor. We must get him out first.. .

"Go ahead and get him out," Wright said venomously. "The door's not locked. Be my guest."

"Since we've got you anyway," Curnow began, "I'm in a position to say that, if you assist the forces of law and —"

"Law and poppycock! I'm saying nothing. You have..." he consulted his wrist watch "... exactly thirty-one minutes, Miss Dancer. And the best of luck to you."

The superintendent sighed heavily. "I think he means it, too," he said grimly. "Looks as though it may be up to you, young Bosustow, after all."

"I'll do what I can — but how did you *get* here anyway? What in the name of... How did you all get here? And why?" There was blank astonishment in the boy's voice.

"Have you forgotten already? You were carryin' on about it enough! You were being tailed, boy. We've had men on you for days. You know that."

"You mean... out in those seas... you followed in another boat? You sailed into the Keg-'ole? You found your way down those passages?" There was stark disbelief in Ernie's voice.

Curnow nodded. "When we follow someone, we follow. And there's others but you can handle a boat, others but you were in school at Porthallow and messed about down here as kids. Some of 'em maybe in the Force."

"So I did hear voices," April said. "But we're wasting time. Come on!"

As she seized the boy's arm and led him to the door, she heard the policeman say: "There's a boat out, down in the cove. Ready to launch. A nice freshly painted boat in a strange reddish-orange colour. Would it be yours?"

"Of course it's mine," Wright sneered. "I have a licence for it, too. I demand an explanation for this unwarrantable intrusion, this insufferable—"

"That's all I wanted to know... Gerald Everard Wright, I am a police officer engaged in enquiries into the deaths of Sheila Duncan and Harry Bosustow. I have reason to believe that you may be able to help the police in their enquiries and I must ask you…

But the girl was outside the front door, running, running for the stables and the thicket which concealed the entry to the passageway leading to the chamber where Mark Slate was held a prisoner.

Bosustow found the place immediately; he led her unerringly down a maze of tunnels and corridors in the rock, stumbling over stones, sliding on the damp patches, lurching against projections in the wan light of a torch whose battery was almost spent. But fourteen more minutes had passed before they stood before the oak door leading to the chamber, for it must have been all of half a mile in a straight line from Wright's house to the main mast of the secret station.

Sobbing for breath, April stood outside the door and stared at the thread of light outlining it. At least Mark wasn't in the dark, she thought.

"Mark," she croaked. "Mark? it's April — are you all right?"

"April! Don't for God's sake come in! Don't touch the door." The voice was tight with anxiety, the voice of a man dragged back from a journey from which there was no return.

"All right, Mark..."

"No, you don't understand. There's some kind of infernal machine wired to the door; it'll go up the moment you

"I know, Mark. I know, Listen, we've got to get you out... Tell me: can you see the door on your side?"

"Very nicely, thank you."

"How is the booby trap fixed? Is it a wire attached to the handle? Could we maybe saw through a different part of the door without tripping it? Is it a circuit that gets broken? Is it a contact? Can you see if —"

"It's none of those," Slate's voice cut across her, stronger now. "There's a trembler coil. The slightest move would You don't have to open the door. If you leaned hard on it, or rattled the handle…"

"What's in the chamber, Mark?"

"Me."

"Mark, this isn't the time... What else?"

"A great number of sticks of dynamite, a quantity of nitro glycerine in drums, a huge Victorian hour glass connected to an electrical complex that looks like the inside of a computer, a bulb hanging on its flex, and that's all!"

"There's no other entrance, no other door?" Her voice was taut with despair.

"You want jam on it, don't you, lovey?" Mark Slate said.

"How's the air in there, Mr. Slate?" Ernie Bosustow asked suddenly.

"Hallo! That sounds like our lighthouseman… Nice and fresh, thank you, if that helps... *Oh. I see what you mean*... Yes. There *is* a grating. Rather an old one set in distinctly ropey-looking cement, high up in the wall. You don't think...?" The voice was suddenly tinged with a trace of hope.

"We haven't time to think. We must go," Ernie yelled. "See you."

"I don't want to be a bore," the imprisoned man called, and there was a break in his voice, "but... the sand is pretty low. How much time is there left?"

The girl looked at her watch and caught her breath. "Eleven minutes."

"Eleven minutes. Oh... well, the best of Cornish luck to you."

But the man and the girl were already pelting down the tunnel, to leave the prisoner alone with his solitude and his despair.

"What is it?" April hissed when they were out of earshot. "How...?"

"Old air shaft I suddenly remembered," Ernie panted as he ran. "The smugglers had to put it in... otherwise things went bad... kept their food and provisions there."

"But, Ernie..." The girl dragged him to a halt. "If we have to go all the way back, and then return on the surface to find your shaft in the dark — we'll never make it. You know it took us fourteen minutes just to get here."

He was already running again. "'Course not... There's a way out just round the corner here... if I remember rightly..."

There were eight and a quarter minutes left when they burst out of a clump of bushes and felt the cool night wind on their cheeks. Stars pricked the sky overhead, but the moon had disappeared behind a bank of cloud to the west. Immediately above them, red Lamps glared fiercely two hundred feet from the ground. Farther down the slope of the moor, lighted windows marked the site of a clump of low buildings.

"Good heavens!" April breathed. "This is the main mast. Do the military people know there's a warren of passages with an exit inside their closely-guarded perimeter?"

"Reckon not," the boy chuckled. "But I guess that's how our friend reached a lot of his secrets. How much time now?"

"Seven and a half," she reminded him urgently.

"Should be in the middle of that patch of furze over there no, not this one: the one just beyond that boulder!

"Watch out!... Ah! Ernie was right!... Here we are, my beauty..."

He was holding aside a branch of gorse and staring with evident delight at what April at first thought was a large rabbit hole.

"There?" she asked incredulously. "Down *there*?"

He nodded. "Slants down at an angle of forty-five degrees. If we go feet first, and the grating's as insecure as I remember, I may be able to push it out into the room with my heels and then we can drop through. You'm best take off that sheep skin: the shaft's only eighteen inches square...

There were six minutes left before the hourglass was exhausted and Wright's contraption blew them all sky high when April lowered herself into the burrow after the boy and began wriggling downwards on her back. Of all the under ground journeys she had undergone that night, the twenty-odd feet of the slanting airshaft was immeasurably the worst. For the first few feet, dust, wet earth, pebbles and nameless things that moved were all about her face, threatening to suffocate her. After that, the conduit was carved in the solid rock and she was aware of nothing but coldness, damp, hardness, and the remorseless pressure of thousand of tons of earth, the thickness between her and

the man-made steel structure which might at any minute, with her and the earth and the man bound in the cell somewhere below them, go howling skywards in a million fragments. At any minute? In four and a quarter minutes, to be precise.

The passage became so narrow that she could no longer raise her hands from her sides; they were pinioned as effectively as if she had been in a straightjacket. The darkness was total and absolute, the air stuffing, in the two inches of black space between her nose and the wet rock. And she couldn't take a deep breath because the rock pressed too closely upon her ribs for her to inflate her lungs. She couldn't move back upwards because she had no purchase; all she could do was to inch down into the after the scrabbling noises and gasping breaths that were Ernie.

Four minutes.

Suppose they got stuck? Suppose the shaft had become choked? She dared not speak to him: breath was too precious. But suppose — she put the thought from her. And then, lying on her back in this sightless and speechless black burrow, her feet struck something hard. She could go no farther. Her heels had come up against Ernie's shoulders. He was stuck.

The shaft was wide enough now for her to raise one hand up across her chest. Scraping the knuckles on the rook, she peered at the luminous dial of her wristwatch.

Three and a quarter minutes.

She bit back a sob of despair. What had happened? Why didn't he move? And then he did... There was a great bursting, clanging, ringing noise... and a rush of air and a flooding of light and the feel of his shoulders against her soles had gone. And then she was falling.

And suddenly she struck the flagged floor of a room with a jar, and a shower of dust and small stones followed her from the dark hole opening in the wall above and behind her.

Mark Slate was sitting in an iron chair cemented to the floor. His lips were swollen and cracked. He had a black eye. There were ugly bruises on his face. His jacket was torn and there were three thin streams of dried blood across his shirt front. The ankles and wrists wired to the chair were purple from loss of circulation.

"My God!" he croaked through puffy lips. "What happened to *you*?"

April looked at herself and laughed hysterically. Her knees showed through her trousers, her sweater was ripped, there was mud in her hair, and she was covered all over in green slime from the Keg-Hole. Apart from which her boots were rimed with salt and her face was bleeding from half a dozen small cuts. "Excuse me," she said. "I didn't bother to dress."

Ernie was staring at the complexity of wires and valves and detonators surrounding a huge hour glass in a wooden stand, from the top half of which the pepper-and-salt grains of sand were silkily pouring. On the dwindling remnant of sand spiral ling towards the hole, a tiny square of metal attached to a hair-thin wire was riding.

"Ernie!" she almost screamed. "I know a bit about explosives — but the complexity of that defeats me! I'd have to trace back... I couldn't... I mean we can't release him and go — and we've only got... we've only got a minute and a half..."

The boy looked up. He was smiling. "Not to worry," he said. "I'm not as young as I look, you know. I did my military service — in the Sappers, as a matter of fact. I was in a special unit... Bomb disposal!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A DEAD LIBERTY!

"The one thing I don't really get," Mark Slate said two days later, "is the bit about the burglaries. If Sheila Duncan was a double agent, knowingly passing on microfilm to THRUSH couriers who called for it at her booth, and if she was killed because they found out she also worked for us, then I still can't see why they had to break in. What were they after?"

"The last roll of film delivered to her," April said. "They wanted it back." They were in the Matra-Bonnet, speeding along the empty roads between Porthallow and Falmouth on their way back to London. It was warmer and the sun was shining.

"You mean it hadn't been collected? Nobody had asked for a pixie in Porphyry and been given a lighthouse instead?"

"No, that's just the point. When he killed her, Wright found nothing and assumed it had already been collected. But then when an agent came — and after him another — and neither burglaries nor enquiries did the trick, then they reported to their controls, and it filtered back

to Wright. So he sent his wife to ask, and when she drew blank, burgled the place again to see if he could discover where she'd hidden the film."

"So it was Wright we chased that night?"

"Yes. He did the break-in while Mason and Jacko manoeuvred poor Harry Bosustow on to Wright's boat and murdered him."

"That Jacko!" Slate said ruminatively, massaging his chin and shaking his head. "No wonder he was able to uproot boulders and heave them at this car! I guess he and Wright will both get life, eh?"

April nodded. "They're lucky there's no more death penalty in Britain these days," she said.

"And the wife got clean away?"

"Yes, she must have seen the police when they arrived and decided that discretion was the better bet for THRUSH. They haven't seen a sign of her since."

"She wasn't on the sub?"

"No... the sub was boarded by a party from a naval frigate called urgently by the Admiralty from a courtesy visit to Falmouth... but there was no Lady Wright aboard. I guess she'll live to fight another day!"

Mark changed down to third and snarled through the twisting main street of a small village. "What about the mysterious Colonel Forsett — and of course his lady?" he asked.

"Forsett was the chief of the THRUSH Satrap at the Tor. He was called to the Wright home while I was a prisoner there so that he could be warned to keep away that night when the explosion was supposed to occur."

Slate's hands, still bandaged at the wrist after his ordeal being wired to the chair, moved easily and expertly on the wheel. They drifted round a hairpin at the head of a valley, streaked up a long, curving bill, and sped across a straight section traversing a tract of moorland beyond. The Matra-Bonnet's exhaust note settled down to a heady roar. "This has been my day for questions, hasn't it?" he said. "I have just two more, lovey."

"All right then," the girl replied, leaning back and closing her eyes to the sun. "Let's have them."

"One: who did make the Porphyry lighthouses with the secret hole?"

"Mason. They found a wheel in the boathouse at the cove."

"Two: you never did say — where was the missing roll of film? What had Sheila Duncan done with it?"

April Dancer sat up and stared ahead through the wind screen. She sighed. "Sheila Duncan was a very brave girl," she said soberly. "She wasn't a double agent at all, in fact. She only *pretended* to be so that she could get next the THRUSH Satrap at Trewinnock Tor. Ditto her affair with Wright. I heard from Waverly in New York this morning: the missing roll of microfilm, together with a report on Wright and his activities, arrived on his desk yesterday. Sheila had mailed it just before Wright caught up with her..."

There was a sudden alarming clangor from behind. A large black saloon, with bell trilling, swept past and edged Mark into the side of the road. An illuminated sign on the car's roof spelled out *Police*.

A big man in uniform got out of the police car and walked ponderously back. He leaned down to Mark's window. It was Superintendent Curnow.

"Well, well, well," he said. "If it isn't Mr. Slate... Good day, Miss. I'll have to trouble you for your driving licence, if you please, sir."

"Oh, good lord!" Slate groaned. "This is murder, Superintendent... and you know the death penalty has been abolished!"

"Just so, sir. But there is a seventy mile an hour speed limit has been imposed by the Minister of Transport. And you were doing a hundred and six."

"Now look," the agent said, "surely you're not going to book me, Superintendent? I mean, after all... after leading you to your murderers... why, it'd be a dead ruddy liberty, that's what it would be!"

The policeman smiled. "That's right, sir," he said, taking out his notebook. "Law... the enforcement of law and order for the public good... that's what liberty is all about, isn't it?"

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